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novel by
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A NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK

a new short
VICTOR FIALA
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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NOV. 1975
VOL. 37, NO. 5

TWO COMPLETE SHORT NOVELS

MIKE SHAYNE'S LATEST ADVENTURE

MURDER AT RANDOM

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The press called them the "Question Mark" murders because the police proved unable to come up with the answers. Then Shayne got into the case to find himself the target of killers he couldn't identify.

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A NEEDLE IN THE HAYSTACK

by HAL ELLSON

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Murder at Random

There was nothing to tie the victims together apart from the dreadful efficiency of the killings. There seemed to be no other connection, no trace of motive, no workable clue to their slayer. It was up to Shayne to solve the string of murders before he became their seventh victim.

by BRETT HALLIDAY

ELLA ARMBRUSTER paused to catch her breath after crossing the street. She was seventy-two years old and carrying a large and heavy bag of groceries from the supermarket to her modest old-fashioned bungalow home two-and-a-half blocks away.

As she stood there, waiting for the wheezes to stop, a smart looking yellow-and-black sedan pulled into the curb behind her and the driver leaned across the seat from the wheel to ask her the most direct route to Flagler Boulevard. He was young, nice looking and extremely polite.

Ella was glad to comply. She shifted the big brown-paper bag to her other arm so that she could lean closer to make her-

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self heard above the roar of a passing trailer truck rig.

Before she could utter more than a couple of words, the hatchback spurted away, leaving Ella Armbruster standing there alone—but not for long. Slowly, she collapsed, dropping the bag and spilling cans of cat food over sidewalk and gutter. The hilt of a large hunting knife protruded from her no-longer-heaving chest.

A middle-aged man, walking a little dog, saw her and said, "Oh, my God!"

Close behind him, a woman screamed. . .

CAPTAIN OF DETECTIVES Len Sturgis, suspended Acting Chief of the Miami Homicide Bureau, paced the carpet of the living room of his small apartment like a long-term convict pacing his cell. He was a large hulk of a man, two inches taller than Shayne's six-one and a full forty pounds heavier than the red-haired private eye.

He said, "Mike, you must think I've lost my gourd calling *you* in. But I have nowhere else to turn."

"Come on, Len," said the redhead. "*You* must have plenty of friends in your own department a lot better equipped to help you than I am."

Sturgis glared balefully at the palm trees beyond the windows, ran a thick-fingered hand through his sparse black hair before returning his gaze to the redhead.

"Mike," he said, "right now I don't know who my friends are—or maybe, who my enemies are. I'm as good as under house arrest until these damned charges are cleared up."

"What about Will Gentry?" said the redhead.

"I'm not blaming the Chief." The Homicide captain's jaw set stubbornly. "Under the circumstances, I'm lucky he didn't throw me in a cell."

"What in hell did you do?" Shayned asked.

"That's just it." Again the baleful glare. "Not a bloody thing. And there isn't a thing I can do to help myself get cleared of crimes I didn't commit."

"What sort of crimes?" The private eye lit a cigarette. "Remember, this is all news to me."

"Would you believe taking payoffs from the massage parlors?"

"Frankly, no," the redhead replied. "Can they make it stick?"

"Right now, I don't know what they can do." Sturgis kicked at a brown leather hassock in front of a matching armchair. "Chief Gentry won't

even tell me who brought the charges—claims my accusers are being protected from possible police retaliation and harassment."

"Have you got a lawyer?" Shayne asked.

"Not yet." The big Homicide captain massaged his balding scalp once more. "Don't worry about that. I'll have protection for the hearing. But the Chief says the minute I get one, he'll have to make the suspension official and the papers will get the whole bloody smear. And *that* kind of a smear, even if it's one hundred percent false—which it is—will stick in the public mind for good."

"Len," said the redhead, "what do you want me to do about it?"

Sturgis looked down at him, some of the cold fury leaving his face. In quieter tones, he said, "Find out who's in back of the charges and why they were made. And don't worry about your fee, you money-hungry bastard. I have enough in the bank to carry you—and before you open your fat mouth, every penny of it came out of my salary."

The redhead thought it over. Until Sturgis called him at the office earlier that morning, he had not even known that the city's second ranking police officer was in trouble.

He said, "I'll have to talk to the Chief, you know."

"He's as up in the air as I am," said Sturgis.

"Then why the house arrest bit?"

"I don't think for a moment that was the Chief's idea, Mike—not for a minute. I've seen a lot of guys set up in my time, but never anything like this. What bugs me the most is that I don't know why—unless it's to put me on the shelf right now."

"You must have stepped on *somebody's* toes," Shayne told him. "Think back, Len."

"What do you *think* I've been doing since the Chief had me put on ice." Sturgis's voice grew thick with anger again. "I can tell you one thing—I may not be a saint, but I've never taken a payoff from a vice ring in my life."

Shayne believed him. He had known Len Sturgis a long time. Although they had clashed more than once over the years in the course of murder investigations—conflicts made almost inevitable by their jobs—it had never occurred to the redhead that the Detective Captain was anything but an honest cop.

He said, "Len, what in hell *were* you working on when these charges hit?"

Sturgis sighed and again ran

his fingers through his almost non-existent hair. He said, "It was these damned 'Question Mark Killings,' as the *News* has labeled them. The Chief thought I was nuts throwing everything else over—but I don't like the idea of a Boston Strangler or a Los Angeles Slasher loose in Miami. So I've been after him—or them—all out."

Shayne thought this over while Sturgis resumed his carpet-pacing. There had been four so-called "Question Mark Killings" over the past six weeks. It was not until the fourth of these murders, that of 80-year-old David Larson, that the Miami *Daily News* decided to build a major crime story by associating the crimes.

There had been little else to connect them—the impersonal efficiency of the killings being their only visible link. Old Larson was a long-retired insurance broker, shot to death from the sidewalk while cutting back the rosebushes in the front yard of his modest cottage.

Harry Connors, the first alleged victim of the "Question Mark Killer," was a 36-year-old barfly of no regular trade or profession—quietly stabbed in the back as he selected a magazine from the rack outside the liquor store closest to his near-Skid Row hotel.

Louise Smith, 44, was personnel manager of a small chain of smart boutiques in the Miami area. She had been shot through the window of her ground-floor office while seated at her desk.

Clair Daniels, 53, a double divorcee who lived in comfortable suburban style on her alimony checks, had been quickly and quietly garotted while walking her Yorkshire terrier at dusk—with the tiny animal's chain leash.

Shayne considered the little he knew of the murders, said, "What makes you think they're related—apart from the recent splurge in the media?"

"Call it a hunch if you will," said Sturgis, frowning. "Mike, you know as well as I that random snipers don't use little dogs' chains or knives when they operate—while professional hit men have regular M.O.'s. Maybe it was the lack of any M.O. that got me thinking. Hell, even a psychotic like the Boston Strangler followed a regular pattern. Ditto the L.A. Slasher. But I got this feeling after the Louise Smith murder. And the other two wipeouts strengthened it."

"Did you find a link?"

The Acting Homicide Chief shook his huge head. "Not a whisper," he said. "They didn't even know each other. And

then I get set up for a fall on these phoney charges. It just doesn't make sense."

"You want *me* to look into them?" the private detective asked.

Sturgis shook his head, said, "Just get me out of here, Mike, and I'll look into them myself."

"You think there's any tie-in, Len?"

"You've got to be out of your mind, Mike." Sturgis sighed, scowled, then added, "Anyway, thanks for rallying 'round. I won't forget it."

"Better not or I'll set you up myself."

The two crime veterans glared at each other, then smiled. With a wave of his hand, the redhead was on his way. . .

LIKE HIS Homicide captain, Miami Chief of Police Will Gentry was pacing the carpet. His always red face was redder than ever, a purple vein throbbing in his left temple. When he passed the square wastebasket beside his office desk, he grimaced and dropped the unlit cigar he had been chewing into it. He had bitten the perfecto almost in two.

Glowering at Shayne, he said, "Dammit, Mike, do you think I *liked* having to put Len under house arrest? But I didn't have any choice."

The redhead said, "You believe the charges against him are true then?"

"Not for a living moment." Gentry reached for another cigar from the open humidor alongside his blotter, then thought better of it and reversed the gesture. "If Len was ever on the take, you'd better believe I'd know it."

"Then why in hell. . . . ?" Shayne let it hang.

"Because the mayor himself ordered it!" Gentry paused, then added, "I've seen some of the evidence—photostats of affidavits by massage parlor madams listing payoffs, tapes of statements by bagmen who delivered the loot to a dummy address over a period of months, even a safety deposit box under

a dummy name with a couple of grand in cash in it. Somebody went to a lot of trouble and expense to set Len up."

"You believe it?"

"*Of course not!*" The Chief all but shouted the words.

"Then why in hell. . . ?" Shayne repeated the question.

"Because I take orders from the Commissioner—and the Commissioner takes orders from the Mayor—and the Mayor himself ordered it."

"But if the charges are false, as you believe—" Shayne's left eyebrow rose.

"Of *course* they're false!" Gentry interrupted. "Phoney as a six-dollar bill. But they'll hold up until they're proved invalid."

"The mayor's not running for reelection this year." Shayne frowned.

"There's that by-election coming up in the Southwest District next Tuesday," said Gentry. "When His Honor passed the word, he stressed the importance of getting his candidate through. It has something to do with the balance of power in the seats of the mighty."

"What in hell has a by-election in the Southwest District got to do with Len Sturgis?"

"Don't ask *me*," the Chief of Police growled. "I've been trying to figure *that* one out since I got the word from on high. *Politics!*"

Gentry all but spat the word as he sank into the reinforced swivel chair behind the desk and rested his face in his hands.

"Do you mind if *I* give it a look-see?" Shayne asked.

"I don't see what harm you can do, Mike." Gentry lifted his face to look at the redhead. "Though what in hell you can do that the Department isn't already doing beats me. I guess you can't exactly blame Len for being a bit paranoid about it."

He paused, then added, "One condition, Mike—if you *do* stumble onto something we've missed with that Irish luck of yours, keep me informed."

"Okay."

Gentry's eyes went hard as blue marbles. "If you don't, I'll be riding you so hard you'll wish you never took it on. I mean that, Mike."

"Okay!" said the redhead. "When is Len's hearing set?"

"A week from Friday," said the Chief.

"That's three days after the election." Shayne's left eyebrow rose again.

"It's the best we could do with the crowded court schedule." Gentry spoke bitterly.

The telephone on his desk spoke its summons. The Chief

swore, said, "I told Piper no calls while you were here." He hesitated, then picked up the instrument, said, "Yes, Sergeant, what is it?"

His tone was heavy with frustration—nor did what he heard appear to lift his mood noticeably.

When he hung up, he said, "Well, Mike, we just had another. A Mrs. Ella Armbruster, a widow, seventy-two years old. Stabbed to death on her way back from the supermarket. On top of everything else. . . !"

Shayne said, "I take it there's been no arrest."

"It doesn't make sense. She was stabbed from a car." He rose, began pacing again, added over his shoulder, "Nothing seems to make sense around here anymore."

"Len told me he'd been working on these 'Question Mark' killings till you locked him in," said the redhead.

"That's right. I was on his back about it."

"Do you think there's any connection?"

"No way, Mike." Gentry gestured the thought away as absurd, then frowned and added, "Still, nothing else adds up." Another pause, then, "What the hell, Mike, I'm going off my rocker. How *could* they be connected?"

II

A GOOD question—a very good question—Mike Shayne decided as he drove his sturdy Buick away from Miami Police Headquarters, heading toward the Southwest District. A fifth murder, motiveless and untraceable as the earlier killings, was certain to increase in geometric ratio the hue and cry in the press and other media already raised over the so-called "Question Mark Killings."

Recalling that it was the *Daily News* that had given the murders their label, the detective pulled over to the side and reached for the telephone with which his car was equipped. He got the City Desk quickly, asked for his old friend, Tim Rourke, cynical, worldly-wise, not infrequently dissolute ace reporter on the *News* staff.

Rourke was Shayne's oldest and most valued friend, he was out on a story—the Ella Armbruster story as the redhead quickly found out. He hung up, pondered the advisability of following up on Ella himself, decided against it—not because his client had told him to lay off but because he doubted there would be any clues to the identity of Ella's murderer on the scene of the crime.

There had been no such clues

in the four previous killings.

Instead, the redhead decided to look into the by-election doings in the Southwest District. For almost a hundred years, the newly named Southwest District had been a virtual wasteland, hugging the edge of the Everglades and largely under water save in a dry season. It had served as a truck farming area (not very successfully due to the damp), as a thieves' picnic and burial ground and, until recent years, as a major city dump.

Over the decades, the thousands of tons of garbage, of smashed automobiles, of rotted lumber and ashes, had brought slow defeat to the swamp as they had to the farmland around. Today, thanks to the recent population explosion, abetted by the influx of Cuban refugees from the Castro regime, the long neglected SWD was a prime target for suburban development.

Shayne turned south off the Tamiami Trail where a number of roadside signs promised the latest in condominium and other forms of controlled residential living in various stages of development. The road was wide, well graded, obviously fresh-paved, lined with still-young transplanted cypress trees.

To left and right, old communities, little above the shanty level, were interspersed with half-built, almost-built and still unstarted new housing plots. He passed two gaunt looking incipient shopping centers and slowed as he reached an older collection of shops that lined a street as obviously unnew as the highway he had left behind him was the reverse.

An empty store-front, hung with red-white-and-blue bunting, proclaimed itself via a large cardboard sign as the headquarters of Luis Gonzales, Democratic candidate. Parking in a diagonal slot fifty feet beyond, Shayne walked back to the campaign office and entered it via an open door.

A slim, swarthy young man seated behind a table tabulating registration charts looked up and said, "What can I do for you, sir?"

The redhead said, "I'd like to see Mr. Gonzales."

The young man rose, extended his hand, said, "At your service." A man and two women working at other tables in the back of the shabby room looked around, then returned to their chores.

"Where can we talk?" the detective asked. He gave his name, offered identification, which was waved aside.

"I should have recognized Mike Shayne," the candidate

said, offering his hand. "My apologies." He spoke with a faint Spanish accent. "We can talk here. I have no secrets from my fellow workers."

Mike Shayne suppressed a sigh, reflecting that, while such candor was not uncommon with candidates for office before election, it all too often vanished immediately afterward. Still, Gonzales's pleasant manner was disarming.

The readhead said, "How do things look for next Tuesday?"

The candidate reached for a cigarillo, lit it, said, "I only hope my rival is as worried as I am."

"He probably is," Shayne assured the man. "What's at stake in this election? Beyond determining which party gets control?"

The Democratic candidate laid it out for him. If he were elected, he would see to it that zoning restrictions were fair, that Spanish speaking householders would have a fair say in the burgeoning development of the district, with heavy emphasis on bi-lingual schooling.

"After all," he concluded, "our money is as good as anyone else's—and most of us have had to work a great deal harder for it. All I want to do is promise them a fair shake as the development progresses."

This, thought the redhead, seemed a far cry from the concern of Len Sturgis at getting his record cleared of the false charges currently threatening it. He heard Gonzales through, then thanked him.

"If you plan to talk to my Republican rival," said the candidate walking to the door with him, "you'll find his H.Q. two miles further south in the Crestonville shopping center."

When Shayne slid into a parking space outside the flag draped concrete-and-brown-timber building that housed the campaign office of the rival candidate, he was humming offkey an old melody—"What a Difference a Day Makes." In this case the time factor of a *day* was replaced by a *mile*. Halfway between the two offices, the contrast had appeared as he passed through a pair of imposing walled gates beneath a flat arch on which was embossed the word *Crestonville*.

Despite the raw bones of new construction, this development promised to live up to the "luxury living" promises of the signs at the Trail turnoff. If the sound of the bulldozer was heard in the land, it was being endured to good purpose and prodded by obvious big-time capital investment. The H.Q. itself boasted high ceilings, soft indirect lighting and a series of well groomed secretaries of

both genders, who passed him along successively until he found himself in the presence of the obviously favored candidate, Avery Cole.

Cole wore a bright plaid jacket, a youthful brown Mod hairdo surrounding a slightly too-mature face and a medium-wary expression. But his manner was briskly pleasant as he rose to greet the detective.

"Yes, Mr. Shayne?" he said, extending a muscular hand.

The redhead played it straight. "I have occasion to visit your rival just now, and I thought I'd like a look at his opposition," he said.

"A good man"—the contempt was almost veiled—"but he's trying to make a racial issue of it. There's no need for that. We plan to segregate by age groups, not by race, creed or color. I can assure you. . ."

It sounded rehearsed, as though the phrases had been uttered word for word in endless campaign addresses. As it continued, the redhead wished he had not followed Gonzales's direction. He was grateful when a desk phone interrupted the speil.

Before answering, Avery Cole said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Shayne, but this is a very busy time. I hope you'll excuse me. . ."

Dismissal, gratefully received—but, as the detective reached the doorway, the candidate said, "Mr. Shayne, a moment please!" Then, into the phone, "Yes, Lee, he's still here. Very well, Lee."

He hung up, said, "Mr. Bannock heard you were here. He'd like to meet you."

Bannock—Bannock? The redhead tried to pin down the name, which rang a bell of memory in his head. He decided what the hell and waited, still on his feet. He did not have to wait long.

The door opened as if forced by a battering ram and one of the largest men Shayne had ever seen, apart from pro-football defensive linemen and basketball stars of big league dimensions, entered. Nor was size his only mark of distinction.

At least six-and-a-half feet tall, Bannock had the shoulders of a coal heaver and the lean hips of a sprinter—anatomical plusses encased in some of the most obviously expensive sports clothes the redhead had ever seen. The newcomer was perfectly tailored, his dark gold hair styled by a master. His face was craggily handsome and his whole being radiated power—an impression heightened as he removed platinum-rimmed dark glasses to reveal a pair of the lightest blue

eyes in Shayne's experience.

He stared down at the detective for a long moment, then grinned like a happy schoolboy and shook his head and said, "By God, I've always wanted to meet the man who got the goods on Uncle Tim and put Aunt Marie in the upper brackets with that half-million cash settlement!"

The voice was rich and deep and redolent with charm unexpected in such a man-mountain. The hand that gripped Shayne's suggested strength unexerted that could easily have mashed the redhead's steel-muscled fingers to pulp.

"Come on," he said. "Let's split this mausoleum and get some fresh air. Shayne—Mike—I've been hoping to run into you since I hit Miami, and here you are on my doorstep!"

MIKE SHAYNE

III

MIKE SHAYNE did some rapid-fire mental backtracking. Uncle Tim and Aunt Marie rang no memory bells—at least, not under the name of Bannock. On the other hand, the redhead had made it a matter of policy to handle only those divorce cases that offered motivation for criminal investigation. Otherwise, he had kept his hands clean of that generally seamy if lucrative side of his business.

As a result, he had accepted few such cases in his long career—fewer still that involved half-million-dollar settlements. His eyes narrowed as he studied the big man who faced him.

It was the light blue eyes that gave him the clue—Marie Wertham, of course. He had forgotten that her maiden name was Bannock, since she had won considerable renown in the late Thirties and early Forties as one half of a highly successful brother and sister song and

dance team under the name of Jim and Marie Barrett—or, as their fame grew in Broadway and Hollywood musicals, simply as "The Barretts."

They had broken up following Marie's marriage to multi-millionaire Everett Wertham, a wartime "grey" marketeer who had invested his tarnished profits shrewdly in Miami real estate. The redhead had taken on Marie's divorce case only because there had been a real element of danger for his client.

Lee Bannock, then, had to be Jim Barrett's son. Talk about roosters coming home to roost. . .

"How *is* your Aunt Marie?" Shayne inquired.

"A faded rose, still blooming in her fashion," the big man replied. "She's never forgotten what you did for her." A pause, then, "Now what can I do for *you*, Mike? Buy you a drink?"

"Thanks, I'll raincheck it," said the detective, feeling warmed by Bannock's aura of amiable vitality.

"If we've had any murders around here, I haven't heard about them," Lee Bannock said.

"No murders," Shayne assured him. "I'm out here to check on the election prospects Tuesday for a client."

The big man spread his arms wide, seeming to span the large office from wall to wall. His teeth flashed white in a boyish grin.

"Between you and me, Mike," he said, "Crestonville can't lose no matter how it goes. Oh, we'd like to see our man make it—right, Avery?"—this with a nod toward the almost completely effaced candidate. "But we're too far along to be stopped now."

From what he had seen of the huge project, the redhead was willing to buy that—nor did it seem to him likely that any project Lee Bannock set his mind to would be easy to check. He nodded farewell to Avery Cole as the obvious boss of Crestonville led him back through the outer offices.

Standing on the wise grey marble steps of the administration building under a pillared portico, Bannock said, "Mike, do you know a place in town called the *Pomme de Terre*?"

"I've heard of it."

"I have a regular table reserved there. How about dining with me tomorrow night? I'll see if I can't enveigle Aunt Marie out from behind her African violets for a reunion. Seven o'clock okay?"

Shayne did not answer. For some seconds, out of the corner of an eye, he had been following the movement of a dark blue sedan some fifty yards from the portico in the parking

lot. Moments after he and Bannock emerged from the administration building, it had slid silent from its space, swung in a narrow turn and was proceeding slowly toward them.

There was something too purposeful, something too deliberate, in its approach that caused the hairs at the nape of his neck to stiffen. As it drew close, it slowed to a crawl and the redhead, his attention fully upon it, caught a glint of sunlight along the barrel of what looked like a handgun with silencer poised ready to shoot through the open window.

Shayne's first impulse was to go for his own Magnum in its shoulder holster—but he doubted that he could draw it in time for more than a flash shot. Instead, he dropped to the marble surface, rolled a football block at Lee Bannock to knock him out of the line of fire.

The big man's reflex reaction revealed that he, too, had played football—more recently and in faster company than the detective ever had. He crouched, pivoted, handfought Shayne's oncoming body, retreating before it, even as a short dull sound came from the driveway directly in front of them, followed by the roar of a motor in a sudden acceleration, speeding from the scene.

"Son of a *bitch!*" said the developer in a tone of surprise as Shayne scrambled to his feet. "The bastard *shot* me!"

The redhead's immediate reaction was to race for his car and take off in pursuit, using the radio-telephone to call ahead for a police cutoff if the would-be killer proved impossible to catch from behind. But he hesitated, concerned for the big man's condition. He had seen too many instances, where bullet wounds were involved, when mere seconds determined a victim's survival.

He needn't have worried. Moving with the speed of a giant jungle cat and uttering roars of outrage, Bannock cleared the broad steps in a single leap and dashed for a glittering Cadillac convertible with top down parked immediately across from the entrance. The detective was barely able to get into it from the other side before they were off in a screech of protesting rubber.

"I'm going to take the son of a bitch apart," Bannock said to Shayne without looking as the big car rocked around the turn into the development highway.

The redhead looked at his companion, who was staring at the road ahead of them, lips curled back to reveal his set white teeth. A growing splotch of crimson was already staining

the chrome yellow of his beautifully cut flannel blazer directly below the right armpit.

"You're bleeding, Lee," Shayne told him. "You'd better let me drive."

"The bastard only creased me," Bannock replied. "I'll be okay. No time to change places." He clamped his arm tight against his side in an effort to stop, or at least slow, the flow of blood.

"Can you have the gates closed?" the detective asked.

"No way," the big man replied. "The automatic controls aren't installed yet."

Although the speedometer hit 111 miles per hour as they rocked around the banked curves of the sleek roadway, they caught not a glimpse of the would-be assassin presumably fleeing ahead of them. When they reached the outskirts of the settlement where Gonzales had his headquarters without a sign of their quarry, Bannock slowed and braked to a halt.

"Maybe you'd *better* take over, Mike," he said quietly. "I don't want to pass out at the wheel. Luckily, there's a hospital of sorts two blocks ahead on the left."

Shayne walked around the Cadillac and got behind the wheel. The tonneau was a puddle of blood. Bannock looked down, saw it, then smiled at the redhead and said, "If you hadn't dropped to take me out of the play. . ." He let it hang, added, "I wonder which one of us that so-and-so was after."

With that, he slumped forward in a dead faint while Shayne got the car to the one-story hospital. It took three interns and the detective to lift him out of the car and get him inside for treatment. . .

By the time Shayne saw that Lee Bannock was safely treated and under sedation and had got the Cadillac cleaned and back to the Crestonville development and was once more behind the wheel of his own car, the afternoon was shot. He called Lucy Hamilton at his office to tell her to lock up for the night.

Lucy reported that Len Sturgis had been calling and that Tim Rourke had informed her he would be dining as usual at The Beef House and wanted to see him. Apart from routine calls from prospective clients, there was nothing else to report.

"How about our dinner date?" she asked him.

"Better raincheck it till tomorrow," he told her. "If I don't get to Len, I've got an idea he'll be climbing the walls of his apartment. Sorry, Angel."

Her good-bye was cool—understandable under the cir-

cumstances, since they had planned their date two days earlier. His drive into town was uneventful. The crest of the late-afternoon rush hour traffic was past.

Bannock's last two sentences before he passed out from loss of blood lingered uneasily on Shayne's mind.

"If you hadn't dropped to take me out of the play. . ." And then, "I wonder which one of us that so-and-so was after."

The thought that he had exposed Lee Bannock to the would-be assassin's bullet instead of protecting him from it troubled his conscience. The question of which of them was the intended target troubled him, *period!*

He had reported the shooting as accidental to the hospital, not wishing involvement in police routine and judging that the big development man was accustomed to taking care of his own problems if only by the way he had taken after the gunman himself instead of calling in the authorities.

Mercifully, no one at the development headquarters building had been outside to witness the shooting and the fact that the structure was soundproofed had prevented the single shot from being heard—especially since, thanks to the silencer used, it had made little noise.

He simply told Avery Cole's secretary that Mr. Bannock had been hospitalized by a minor accident and left it at that.

As he considered what had happened, the detective decided that it was unlikely he himself had been the intended target. Granted the inevitable leaks in any police department, there could hardly have been time since Shayne's taking on Len Sturgis's problem to organize such an attempt.

Besides, where was the connection, even if the by-election campaign for the Southwest District was hotter than indicated by either candidate? This question brought Shayne back full circle to the puzzle he had set out to solve in the first place. . .how Len Sturgis could be involved sufficiently in the bi-election to warrant his framing.

Or could it have been another in the growing chain of so-called "Question Mark" Killings?

Unlikely, to put it mildly, Shayne decided. Still. . .

IV

WAITING FOR a red light to change, Mike Shayne called the hospital to inquire about Lee Bannock's condition, just in case. To his surprise, he was put through to the wounded

giant, who said, "Why in hell did you let them hide my clothes Mike? How the devil can I get out of this dump?"

"You'd better stay put till you absorb some of the blood they've pumped into you," the redhead told him. "And, by the way, the next time you take a look at my Magnum, don't kick the safety off before you squeeze the trigger, you stupid bastard."

There was brief silence, then, "I suppose you expect me to thank you for that."

"Be thankful you're still alive," said the redhead.

"I am—I think," the big man replied. "Don't forget, dinner tomorrow night at the Pomme de Terre."

Shayne thought about his already postponed date with his secretary, said, "Is it okay if I bring a companion."

"As long as she's good looking."

"She is—but what in hell makes you think you can make it so soon, Lee? Remember, you've been wounded."

"I'm not likely to forget," the big man assured him. "But nobody's keeping me in no hospital nohow for more than one night. You should see the nurses here."

"I have," Shayne assured him. "You could do worse."

"Tell me how!"

Shayne was smiling as he returned to the phone to its cradle. He could not recall when he had met a man he liked as well on first contact. He hoped, if Bannock were the gunman's intended contact, that the murderer would not be successful.

But what if Shayne himself had been the intended target? His thoughts went around and around and came out nowhere all the way to Len Sturgis's apartment. Nor was the big Homicide captain much help in solving the problem.

"Who's behind it, Mike?" was his first questrion.

"From something the mayor dropped, Will Gentry seems to think there's some connection with the by-election in the Southwest District," the detective replied.

"That's a lot of bushwah!" The Homicide captain all but snorted the words. "I haven't even been out in that boondock in six months."

"Don't be too sure," Shayne replied. He told the big police officer—no longer looming quite so large in comparison to Lee Bannock—of his visit and what had happened.

"What does Gentry think?" Sturgis asked, rumpling his scalp.

"I haven't reported it."

"Jesus, Mike, he'll have your hide."

Shayne explained why he had handled it as he had. Sturgis listened, frowning.

"Of all the high-handed—" he began.

"There wasn't time if I was to get back to you this evening," said the redhead. "Think about *that*."

Sturgis growled but finally nodded.

Mike Shayne said, "Len, do you think it could have been another 'Question Mark Killing?' "

Sturgis shook his balding head. "Not a chance, Mike. In the first place, there was another of *them* this afternoon, and he's never killed before less than three days apart. Two, he didn't get close enough. Three, he missed."

"Not missed—didn't kill, thank God," said the redhead. "He came close enough. And there has to be a first time."

"It doesn't say so in the books." Sturgis scowled, shook his heavy jowels, added, "I don't like it."

"Neither do I," Shayne spoke drily. "And I don't think Lee Bannock liked it, either."

"What about *him*?" the hulking Homicide captain asked.

"A hell of a big target, Len—half again as big as you. Otherwise, a very likeable guy."

"I'll take your word for it that he's the power behind Avery Cole," said Sturgis. "What bugs me is the chance the man was gunning for you."

"Me, too, Len. The MPD is not exactly a seive—but even if there is a leak, whoever got the word I was on your case had to move too damn fast."

"Which leaves us nowhere," Sturgis growled. Then, spreading his arms in appeal, "Mike, get me out of here before too many other people people get killed?"

Shayne got out of there, sympathizing with the Homicide captain's mounting frustration. It was, he decided, time he looked into the framing of Sturgis from the other end. He headed for The Beef House and Tim Rourke.

The Miami *News* reporter was not in his usual rear booth of the restaurant on Miami Avenue when the redhead arrived there, but Shayne did not wait for him before ordering. He had not had time to consider the emptiness of his stomach, thanks to the unceasing activity of the day since Len Sturgis's call reached his office shortly after noon—but he had not eaten since breakfast, a scratchy affair of coffee and an English muffin.

Hence the impact of the rich aromas of good cooking had an immediate and overwhelming

impact on his taste buds and stomach juices. Even before tasting the triple Martell and soda Rosie, the regular rear booth waitress, brought him without orders, he demanded food.

Nor did he feel like postponing dinner for the few minutes required to broil his usual blood-rare strip steak. Instead, he asked Rosie to have the cart brought around and had an inch-thick gigantic cut from the heart of the huge roast sirloin steaming under its sliding silvered cover, swimming in its own succulent juices. A large baked potato with plenty of butter and a small mound of watercress completed his order.

He was well and happily into it when the lanky Rourke slouched in and slid onto the other side of the booth, to regard the redhead with saturnine affection from over a tall glass of Irish whiskey and water.

"Good old Mike," said the reporter. "Never around where the action is. We had another 'Question Mark Killing' today, you know."

"I heard about Ella Armbruster," replied the redhead. "Any idea who did it?"

"Several—according to the reports of alleged witnesses, it was a tall, dark, short, blond character driving a green, black, orange, red Buick Continental hatchback convertible."

"Nowhere?" Shayne cut himself another sizable mouthful of the tender beef with the side of his fork.

"Thereabouts," said Rourke, taking a morose but healthy pull on his highball. "What the hell happened to you—I heard something about an accidental shooting in the Crestonville area."

Shayne filled his old friend in between bites. Rourke listened, said, "I told the M.E. the Len Sturgis charges were a frame-up. He hated to agree with me—cop corruption stories sell papers—but he's laying off for the time being. Besides, we're hitting the 'Question Mark' story with all we've got."

"Tim." Shayne paused to swallow a mouthful of beef, added, "Will you please tell me what the 'Question Mark' label means?"

"Don't you read the paper, Mike?"

Shayne said, "Not since this thing started—I've been busy. So why Question Mark?"

The reporter sighed, said, "All right, you meat-head, it's because they raise so many questions."

"Like what?"

"Like *why* these particular victims are being selected by the killer. Like is it one killer

on a homicidal rampage or is there some sort of rhyme or reason behind it all. Like, if there *is* method in this murderous madness, who's paying for it and what's he getting?"

"Okay—so we've got question marks," the detective said. "Any answers yet?"

"Just one—and the police won't let us print it yet. It seems the living quarters of every victim were ransacked before the fuzz got there."

"Have they any idea what's been taken?"

"That makes still another big question mark," said Rourke. He shrugged, added, "And now, for no apparent reason, Len Sturgis of all people is going up on charges."

"Tim," said Shayne laying down his fork and reaching for his drink, "who's behind the charges anyway?"

"Marvin Richman's the attorney who laid them on him, Mike. He says he's representing a private committee out to get civic corruption—and there *is* such a committee, duly if recently chartered. Just as you'd expect from a Richman enterprise."

"*How* recently?" the redhead asked.

"Less than a month," said the reporter. He signaled Rosie to bring him his usual dinner of fried eggs and fried potatoes,

this time substituting roast beef hash for the usual rashers of Irish bacon.

"Keep the toast soft in the center, sweetie," he said. She departed with a flounce of her thigh-high skirt to indicate this parting shot was superfluous.

"Tim," said Shayne, "have you considered that these 'Question Mark Killings' have been going on less than two months?"

Rourke's eyes narrowed. He said, "Just what in hell are you getting at, Mike?"

"Damned if I know exactly," the detective replied. "I have a gut feeling all these angles are tied together—but every time I

try to work out a connection, I wind up exactly nowhere."

"On the face of it, you've got to be out of your everloving mind." The reporter shook his head. "Still, it would be nice to know who's paying Richman's fees—not that *that* shyster is apt to let us find out."

Shayne signaled Rosie for a refill as he put down his glass, said, "Tim, you've been on these murders from the start. I know you have nothing on the killer—but have you found anything—apart from the ransackings—that ties any of the victims together?"

Rourke looked at the redhead with something close to pity, said, "Three are women, two are men. Age range—thirty-six for Barry Connors to eighty for David Larsen. All living in different parts of Miami, all on different economic and social levels as well. To date, no indication they ever heard of each other, much less, *knew* each other. And you ask me to tie them together!"

"I'm just grabbing at straws," said Shayne. "Look at it this way—maybe the victims aren't connected, but their killings are remarkably similar."

Rourke snorted, said, "A silenced rifle sniping to a knife in the chest at close range? You call that similar?"

"You're taking me literally, Tim. The similarity I'm talking about lies in the efficiency of all the murders. Each of them had to be scouted—yet, there's no record so far that any of the victims was being watched. I want to know why those particular individuals were being scouted for murder. I'd give a lot more to know who, if anyone else, is being set up, and by whom."

"You and the police both," said Rourke. "Not to mention my rag and the rest of the media. They're all working overtime now that we've waked them up to the fact there's a multiple killer in town. But to date—nothing!"

He spread his hands, nearly upsetting Rosie's tray as she brought him his dinner along with Shayne's second drink. The detective took a long and thoughtful pull at the Cognac while Rourke savagely attacked his hash and eggs.

Then Shayne said, "There's nothing psychotic about these killings, Tim. If you can call murder clean, they're clean as a whistle. . .too well executed to be random jobs."

"What about that shot at you or Lee Bannock you just told me about?" the reporter mumbled with his mouth full.

"We don't know it's the same killer. Tim, maybe there is no consistent modus operandi in

these crimes—but maybe that *is* the M.O. Maybe it's deliberate, to confuse the cops along with everyone else."

Shayne put down his glass so hard that it slopped over, said, "Dammit, Tim, there has to be a connection—and I've got a gut hunch I won't get my client out of confinement until I find out what it is!"

V

MARVIN RICHMAN'S home telephone number was listed in the book. The attorney was in and proved unexpectedly responsive when Mike Shayne phoned him via a plug-in instrument from The Beef House booth.

He said, "I'll be glad to talk to you, Mr. Shayne, though I don't know how much I can help you. Do you know how to get here?" He gave the detective detailed instructions, added, "I try to turn in by midnight."

Replacing the phone in its cradle, the redhead told Rourke what Richman had said. The reporter shrugged cynically.

"That's Marve all over," he said. "He'll talk to you, all right—he'll talk to anyone. But getting him to say anything is something else. I'm surprised you've never had dealings with him before. He has his finger in a lot of pies."

"We never happened to meet. What's he like?"

"Amiable as hell—he's a genius at public relations. But he has more angles than a cubist sculpture."

"All I want is the name or names of whoever is behind the charges against Len," said Shayne.

"Rots of ruck." Rourke loaded his fork with a messy looking mixture of hash, eggs and potatoes. "Let me know how you make out."

The attorney's residence was a white plaster villa of moderate size in a newly renovated "old" district of Miami. It looked out on the northern part of the long inlet that divides the city proper from the towering hotel extravaganza of Miami Beach. Shayne drove into a brief but winding driveway that ended under a pair of palm trees before a double door entrance.

To Shayne's surprise, the house was dark. He got out and checked the number above the doorbell in the moonlight, to make certain he had reached the right address. He had.

He rang four times, could hear the chime of the bell echo faintly within the dwelling. Thinking of Tim's comment on the attorney's accessability, he was about to turn away when he noticed the thin dark

shadow running up and down in the middle of the double doorway.

Puzzled, he gave the near door a gentle push. It opened inward on silent hinges. With a frown, the detective stepped inside. The hall in which he found himself was darker than the moonswept world outside.

As Shayne's eyes adjusted to the gloom, he became aware of a faint reflection of light from somewhere in the rear of the house. He thought of calling out, decided against it. If anything were wrong, as the opened door suggested, there seemed small sense in betraying his own whereabouts to a possible intruder.

Taking a deep breath, he listened. . .but heard nothing more than the normal noises of the night, plus the faint low thrum of distant highway traffic. The continued silence grew more ominous with each passing second. Shayne felt his hackles rising and his hand went to the grip of the heavy pistol in his shoulder holster.

Moving carefully, keeping close to the right hand wall of the front hall in which he stood, the redhead went toward the glimmer of light. He passed through a doorless portal into a brief corridor at whose far end the light showed more brightly through the open jamb of a door ajar toward the rear of the villa.

He hesitated, again decided against calling the lawyer by name to announce his presence. Long developed instinct, backed by years of experience, told him something was wrong. Drawing the Magnum from its holster, he moved quietly toward the door—and skidded loudly against it, slamming it shut as something round and invisible in the shadows slipped under his left foot.

Reaction was all but instantaneous. A silenced handgun *spatted* from the far side of the barrier he had inadvertently closed and a bullet splintered the door, missing his head by less than two inches as it ricocheted past with the whine of an angry hornet. It was followed by three more shots, each a foot lower than its predecessor, each passing equally close.

If the redhead's slip had not sent him flat against the left wall, he would have been hemstitched from head to groin. He stayed where he was, holding his breath, waiting for a fifth silenced shot, but long seconds passed and it failed to come.

He did not dare drop to the uncarpeted floor lest the next bullet come through the barrier lower still and accomplish the deadly job the others had failed

to achieve. Not did retreat offer safety under the circumstances. He was neatly pinned where he was by a killer who knew he, or someone, was there but could see Shayne no better than Shayne could see him.

The silent seconds ticked past as the impasse continued. Then he heard the faintest of sounds from within the room—indeterminate small sounds whose cause or purpose it was impossible to guess. The redhead went into a crouch and his left foot caused something small to roll on the uncarpeted parquet across a small circle of light cast by the room beyond via one of the bullet holes in the door.

It was a copper cartridge case on which he had inadvertently stepped, leading to the slip that betrayed his presence to the killer beyond the now perforated door. Shayne uttered a silent but fervent imprecation against it. Then, his anger mounting at the stupidity of his position, he cast caution to the soft night winds and, keeping low, burst through the door and took a catlike leap to the left.

A bald-headed man in a richly brocaded maroon satin dressing gown sat at a large mahogany desk. His head lay flat on the blotter, the face turned away from the detective so that he could see the neat, ugly hole at the base of his skull. The desk itself had been swept clean. Papers and folders of all descriptions lay in disorder on the thick Persian carpet that covered most of the floor of the bookcase-lined study.

Shayne's intake of these details was all but subliminal as his entire consciousness focussed on the man who was halfway through the casement window. He wore a charcoal jacket and a black tweed hat whose brim was wide enough to keep his face in shadow. In his visible left hand, he held a black leather attaché case.

He was straddling the sill and his right hand held a magazine pistol with which he snapped another silenced shot at the detective, again missing his head. Shayne's heavy Police Special blasted for the first time, but he had ducked involuntarily as the intruder shot first and his bullet missed its intended target, which was squarely between the stranger's eyes.

There was a yelp as the black tweed hat was lifted from the gunman's head, and then he had disappeared out the window. By the time the redhead got there, he had vanished behind a hedge and the faint sounds of his receding footfalls ceased, to be followed by the slamming of a car door and the

roaring burst of a high-powered sports-car motor, dwindling rapidly as it got under way.

"*Strike-out Number Two. . .*" Shayne said viciously as he contemplated the futility of pursuit.

If the shooting of Lee Bannock that afternoon had placed him in a quandery with regard to the police, it was a small embarrassment compared to his present situation.

While he considered his next move, the redhead walked around the desk, his eyes on the man in the dressing gown. He took it for granted the man was Marvin Richman and there was no doubt that he was extremely dead. His face had been all but blown outward from within as the high-velocity bullet emerged.

A punch-telephone lay on its side by the attorney's chair, emitting a faint hum. Shayne picked it up and hit the buttons for Police Headquarters. Mercifully, Will Gentry was still in his office and the redhead got through to him directly and reported the murder.

"Stay right where you are and don't touch a thing more than you have," the Chief told him.

"When your boys get here, have them tell me to come in," Shayne told him. "This case, whatever the hell it is, has picked up too much speed for routine tie-ups."

"You've got a hell of a nerve, Mike," Gentry growled. "I ought to—"

"You and I ought to talk right now," Shayne told him.

The Chief hesitated, sighed, then said, "As long as you come straight in."

"Scout's honor."

"Oh, hell. . ."

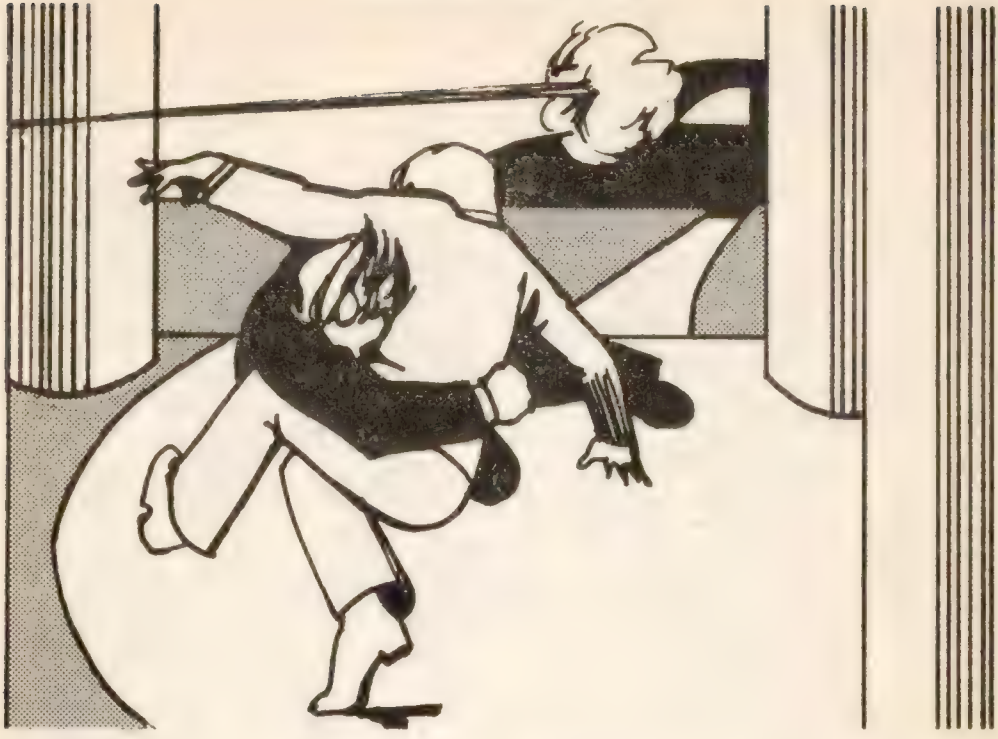
It was assent and the redhead placed the phone back on the carpet as it had lain before he picked it up. Then he returned the handkerchief with which he had covered his hand to its pocket and swung his grey-eyed gaze in a final look around the room.

Finished, Shayne left the house—and all but walked into the arms of a pair of uniformed patrolmen with drawn revolvers who were approaching from the driveway, where their car effectively blocked Shayne's retreat.

He had to submit to the humiliation of being frisked and disarmed and questioned until a car from Headquarters arrived to give orders from Gentry for his release.

"How'd you bats get here so quick?" one of the newcomers asked.

The patrolman who had returned the redhead's wallet and gun said, "Neighborhood alarm.



Some resident heard a shot and saw a car take off."

"Any description?"

A dark sedan with a hyped-up engine," the local cop replied. "As it passed under a street lamp, the witness thought it was blue. Nothing definite beyond that."

VI

IT WAS ENOUGH for the private detective. At least two of the pieces of the wild jigsaw the case had been so far fell into place. When Mike Shayne was seated in front of Will Gentry's desk, he told him about it."

"There are a lot of souped-up dark sedans in Dade County," Gentry growled after Shayne had explained why he had reported the first attempted murder as an accidental shooting, and the fur had finally stopped flying.

"Besides," the Chief added, "the second blue car sighting will never hold up in court and you know it."

"It's enough for me," said the redhead. "I don't have to prove it in court."

"An APB is already out," the Chief told him, adding, "Not that it's going to do a bit of good."

"Don't forget the black tweed hat," said the redhead.

"Plenty of those around, too." Gentry scowled at Shayne, then said, "Mike, there's nothing wrong with you that a high colonic wouldn't cure."

"You're not buying it?"

"How *can* I? Think, Mike—Len calls you in to find out who framed him. I drop a line the mayor dropped on me about the by-election. You go out there and—*wham-bam!*—some hit man takes a shot at you from a blue sedan. Unless you laid a few eggs yourself, there's no way anyone else could know you were on the case, much less organize a hit."

"There's one way," said Shayne.

Gentry thought it over, his face turning slowly bright red. His pouched eyes narrowed to slits as he said, "Are you suggesting a leak from my office?"

"Purely hypothetical." The redhead dismissed it airily. "But you'd better check your intercom, Will—just in case."

"Sergeant Piper? You're mad!"

"No names, Will. But there has to be a leak somewhere."

"Okay, let's suppose there is." Gentry conquered his anger with an effort. "How could your pal beat you to Marve Richman's home through a leak here when not even I knew you were going there? Unless—unless—you have a tail on you all the way and didn't spot it."

"I might have missed a good tail driving to Crestonville," Shayned replied. "But since the shooting there, I've been watching my rear-view mirror. And my informant about Richman was Tim Rourke—at The Beef House. I'll grant you that one could not have leaked from this office. It had to come from some other source."

"Five'll get you fifty this office is clean."

"Taken," said Shayne. "But check your intercom."

"Don't worry—I will." The phone began buzzing and Gentry reached for it, paused to say, "Richman's murder is going to raise a big stink. Now get out of here before I have you thrown in a cell."

"I'm on my way." Shayne sauntered to the doorway, paused to say over his shoulder, "And don't try to weasel out of that fifty you owe me."

Gentry's reply was a vehement gesture of dismissal. As he left the building, the redhead reflected not for the first time that he was glad Will Gentry was his friend—he'd hate to have him for an enemy. The Miami Chief of Police could be very tough, indeed.

Shayne drove back to The Beef House. When he got there it was eighteen minutes past midnight by his wristwatch. Tim Rourke was still seated in his regular rear booth, a half-finished highball still in front of him. Save for the fact that his eyelids looked heavier, he seemed little the worse for wear. He put down the plug-in telephone as the detective slid into the opposite bench.

"I've been waiting for you, Mike," he said. "There's a rumor out you shot Marve Richman. Anything in it?"

The redhead signaled Rosie for a drink, shook his head, said, "If I had, I wouldn't be here."

"What about Richman—is he dead?"

The redhead nodded. "Somebody shot him at his desk before I got there. I got a crack at him but he was off and running."

The reporter made concentric cricles on the scarred booth table with the moisture on the bottom of his glass. He said, "This is going to raise one hell of a stink."

"You sound like the Chief."

"Great minds. . ." Rourke let it hang, added, "Anything you can tell me?"

"Damn little, Tim—thanks, Rosie." He smiled at the pert, plump, little waitress, then, to his old friend, "There are a couple of things I'd like to ask you, though."

"Shoot." Rourke settled silently over his highball.

The redhead marshalled his thoughts. Not only were Rourke and he long compatible—their relationship was often symbiotic—mutually helpful. Over the years, Shayne had given the reporter tips on many a sensational story for clean beats by the *News* that had sold literally some millions of papers.

In return, Rourke, backed by the resources of his gazette, as well as by his long and broad-gauged knowledge of the City of Miami, provided the redhead with a reliable source of background information that had enabled him to wrap up many a case and collect many a fee.

This symbiosis was tacitly accepted by both men, who rarely mentioned its existence. They preferred to take it for granted.

Shayne said, "How important was Marvin Richman?"

Rourke frowned into his diminished drink, said, "That's a tough one for openers. I'd say it would depend on what your relationship was. He was shrewd, a real smart operator, as I told you earlier. Some people thought he was a little too shrewd.

"One loser in a lawsuit brought by a Richman client said, 'He moves like an iceberg—seven eights below the surface.' I'd say a lot of people are going to be sorry he's dead—and a lot more people are going to heave sighs of relief. Does that help?"

"How about blackmail?"

"If he played that game, he was never pinned for it," the reporter replied. "But you can bet, if he played it, the stakes were big and the risks minimal."

"What about his private life?" said Shayne.

"As far as I know, he didn't have any. Occasionally, he'd call one of the Beach madams for a call-girl—he claimed it was purely medicinal—and that's as far as it went."

"You're been doing your homework," Shayne nodded his approval and beckoned Rosie to reward the reporter with a refilled glass. Rourke pointed a long, ill manicured forefinger at the telephone.

"This committee he headed that brought the charges against Len," said the detective. "Have you dug up anything on them?"

"Not much more than I told you earlier, Mike. They are known as the Committee for the Anti-Corruption League—*Cackle* for short."

"You think somebody put them together just to hang the charges on Len and get him out of somebody's way?"

Rourke put down his glass, smacking his lips, then said, "Maybe—but that shaves the time element too fine for my liking. As an educated guess, I'd say that CACL was lying around dormant and somebody—perhaps the late Marve Richman—decided to activate it. There's no way of looking it up until the County Recorder's Office opens tomorrow morning."

"What about the charges against Len—will they be dropped?" the redhead asked.

"Probably—but it might take a little time."

"You sound as if I'm about to lose a client." Shayne winced, then shrugged and added, "Well, hard come—hard go."

"Humor," said the reporter in definitive tones, "is not your forte, Michael. What about this character who got shot out at Crestonville this afternoon?"

"Lee Bannock?" The redhead had to remarshall his thoughts—in the press of events since his return to the city, he had been able to give the blond giant little consideration. He added a, "Why?"

"Just asking—maybe he'd like some protection. I know *I* would in his position." He hesi-

tated, then said, "You seem to be bringing bad luck to everyone you see in this case. You got any ideas on that?"

"I think now the first bullet was meant for me—not Lee Bannock—and I've got some idea how."

"Okay—but have you any idea why?"

"Not yet. But it has to have something to do with the Len Sturgis corruption charges. After all, it didn't start till I took Len on as a client."

"But outside of you, Len and Will Gentry, who in hell else knew you were on it?"

"That," said Shayne, "is the thirty-two dollar question?"

"You mean there's a sixty-four dollar one still waiting to be answered?"

"A pair, at least." And, as Rourke's eyebrows rose, "Which one of us—Lee or me—the gunner wanted to get—and why Marve Richman was murdered."

"So there they sit," said Rourke.

Shayne got up, slid out of the booth, looked down at his old friend and said, "Call me tomorrow when you get the dope from the County Recorder."

"You think it will help?"

"It might."

Shayne walked out into the soft, semi-tropical night and got the Buick out of the parking lot to drive home to his apartment hotel on the Second Avenue and Twelfth Street corner. The neighborhood was going downhill, but the redhead had lived there for so long that it was home.

He did not forget to keep an eye on his rear-view mirror and it was not long before he discovered that he was wearing a tail. He made no effort to shake his pursuer, whom he could only identiy by his headlights, considered calling Will Gentry to inform him of this development. But his hand, already extended toward the car-phone, paused in mid-air and withdrew.

Three sessions with the Miami Chief of Police since early afternoon was at least one too many, he decided. Besides, he had a second thought that deterred him. The following car seemed to more in a hurry than he was. With a faint smile, he put both hands on the wheel.

Just before reaching the entrance of the ramp that led downward to his hotel parking garage, Shayne pulled in to the curb and halted. His slid hand under his left lapel, gripping the haft of his Magnum Special as he waited. If trouble was coming, he was ready.

But the car slid past without any suggestion of attack and pulled in further along the block. The redhead caught a

glimpse of its rear license plate in the headlights of a third car following, and he relaxed. Although it bore no official insignia, the letters were those of the MPD.

Thus assured, he turned in to the garage, parked and took the elevator to his three-room apartment, where he relaxed with a nightcap of Martell and water while he watched the late news on television. Marvin Richman's murder was flashed at the beginning of the broadcast but no additional developments were given. Nor was Shayne mentioned on the air.

Before turning in, he decided to give Len Sturgis a ring and let him know of the evening's tumultuous happenings. The giant Homicide Captain greeted him jubilantly, said, "Mike, I don't know what you did or how you did it, but with Marve Richman out of the way I'll be off suspension in a matter of hours."

Shayne felt tempted to say, "'Wait till the sun shines, Nellie,'" but restrained himself and uttered a mere, "Glad to hear it."

When Sturgis had completed expressing his gratefulness with a vow to catch the "Question Mark Killer," the detective said, "Len, here's something to sleep on—what did you have on our murderous friend sufficiently important to have you framed to put you out of his way?"

The suspended Homicide captain's ebullience faded and his deep voice became almost pathetic as he said, "I've asked myself that question a couple of thousand times—and, so help me, I haven't the slightest idea, Mike."

This could well be the $64,000 question, the redhead thought as he finally turned in. He slept the rest of the night like a log, did not waken until Lucy's morning call brought him out of it at eight o'clock.

VII

MIKE SHAYNE got to his modest office on Flagler Street at nine-thirty-three. Lucy Hamilton was at her desk in the outer room and greeted him with a cool, "Good morning, Michale."

"Morning, Angel." Shayne tossed his hat with practiced accuracy onto a hook on the tree in a corner. "Any messages?"

He was not insensitive to his long-time secretary and close friend's coolness. She had, he decided, every right to feel peeved over his breaking their dinner date of last night. He masked a smile as he noted that she had had her soft brown

hair carefully "done" for the occasion.

She said, "Captain Sturgis called. He says he'll call back but not to try and reach him since he's not at home."

The redhead's left eyebrow lifted. Len's suspension had been lifted even more quickly than he expected following Richman's murder. He wondered what pressure the hulking Homicide captain had applied to the Chief to get out of house arrest, inwardly winced in sympathy with his old friend.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Nothing important," she said. "Oh, the building super called to say he'll have the faucet fixed in the john sometime today."

Shayne mentally blessed Tim Rourke for keeping his name out of the news in connection with the Marve Richman murder. Otherwise, the office would be hip deep in reporters and photographers—but the *News* journalist respected the redhead's wish not to be publicized while working on a case unless he specifically requested it.

"Angel—" Shayne seated himself on a corner of her desk and produced his best effort at a winning smile—"I'm sorry about last night, but I've been damned busy trying to clear Len of those phoney charges."

"It looks as if you've succeeded," Lucy replied. "He's out on the street."

"Shayne basked in the sudden warmth of her smile, for her moods were important to him, felt his own heart warm at the quick glow in her deep brown eyes—until he realized neither smile nor gaze was directed at him but beyond and behind him.

Lee Bannock stood there, seeming to fill the outer office with his mastodonic charm. If, to Shayne, his face looked pale beneath the pigskin tan that covered it, he seemed otherwise little the worse for the wear and tear of the afternoon before.

He wore a turquoise blue turtleneck beneath a sapphire blue blazer with gilt buttons and his perfectly cut slacks

looked to be genuine English grey flannel. His feet were covered by English bench-made loafers whose hue matched the tan of his face.

"Hi, Lee." Shayne stood up. "I see you found some clothes. What brings you here?"

"Mike, I had a lot of time to think over what happened to me yesterday afternoon, and I've come to the conclusion I need your help."

"Come on inside." the redhead opened the gate in the railing that bisected the outer office.

"Will you want me, Michael?" Lucy, looking like a little girl about to see a richly frosted birthday cake removed uneaten, reached for her shorthand pad.

"If I do, I'll ring." Shayne decided she had *that* coming to her. He said to Bannock as they entered the inner office, "I'm surprised to see you walking about."

"Oh, they can't keep a bad man down," Bannock told him.

Shayne carefully closed the door behind them and motioned the giant to a chair that creaked as he planted his massive yet graceful bulk in it.

"Mike," he said, "my first thoughts were that that damned gunman was after you. Now, I'm not so sure he wasn't trying to put a bullet in me."

"It's possible." The redhead hedged. "What made you change your mind?"

"Well. . ." The big man took a deep breath. "You know the condition housing development is in over most of the country."

"I've heard it's not good."

"Especially in California," Bannock told him. "And that's where I grew up. I've built some big ones out there and I saw this damned depression or recession or whatever coming six years ago, when the Federal Reserve began upping its rates to 'cool off' a supposedly overheated economy.

"Right then, I began unloading all but my most solid properties and looking around for a safe place to carry on my business—which is literally building communities to the very best of my ability. A number of factors made me decide Florida was the right place.

"I have some connections here and, after studying the prospects, I decided on the Crestonville project. Naturally, everyone in the industry thought I was crazy, but I went ploughing right ahead. At first, my competitors went around grinning because they were sure I'd fall flat on my face.

"Now that some of them are beginning to feel the pinch and I'm selling houses and lots fas-

ter than I can build and fill them, I'm getting a lot of feedback—and you know as well as I do that the housing and development industry is not exactly a playground for pussycats. Not unless they're Kilkenny cats that destroy each other completely, leaving only the echo of their howls."

Bannock paused.

Shayne said, "You think a business rival took a shot at you yesterday?"

"Or hired somebody to do it." Bannock's wide gesture was eloquent. "Anyway, I want you around to cover my back when it's exposed."

Shayne said, "Lee, I appreciate your coming to me—"

"But you're going to turn me down?" Bannock interrupted.

"Right now, I'm tied up with another personal client," said the redhead. "As you probably know, I don't employ a staff beyond Lucy out there. So I can hardly work for two clients at one time."

The big man's massive jaw thrust forward. He was evidently not going to take no for an answer. But before he could open an argument, the telephone on Shayne's desk buzzed its summons.

"Yes, Lucy?"

"It's Len."

"Put him on."

Mike Shayne Headlines the Next Issue With—

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Bob Galbraith was one of Miami's most forgotten men—until word got around Skid Row that he had come into a million dollars. Then many people wanted him, including some of the most vicious human sharks in the city—as well as Shayne, who was hired to find him for a fat fee.

Sturgis said, "Mike, I'm back in business."

"So I gathered," said the redhead. "Congratulations. How'd you manage it so fast?"

"I didn't. *You* did," the hulking Homicide captain growled. "Chief Gentry says he needs me to clear up this mess before you get yourself killed on your own."

"Watch your language," said

Shayne. "I may triple your fee."

"You're fired as of eight a.m.," Sturgis replied. "Mail me your bill and pray that I pay it."

Shayne smiled as he put the phone back. It was, he knew, as close to a thank-you as he would ever get from the Acting Captain. He lifted his grey eyes to meet the blue eyes of Lee Bannock, said, "I'm fired. So you got yourself a guy,"

"I'll breathe a lot easier," said the big fellow.

The phone buzzed again. Lucy said when Shayne picked it up, "Tim's holding to talk to you."

"Mike," said the reporter, "I got the Assistant County Recorder to open up early. I have the CACL list and it's hotter than you think. I'll meet you at the Pancake House on Biscayne in twenty minutes."

Rourke hung up. The redhead looked thoughtfully at the phone before lifting his head to say, "Lee, do you think you can stay in one piece for a couple of hours?"

"I can try. Why?"

"Because I'm going to be busy. You got a good safe place to stay?"

Bannock did not ask him why he was going to be busy and the detective liked him the better for it. Instead, the developer said, "I could put in some time with Aunt Marie and her African violets. Just between us, I'm still pretty rocky from yesterday."

"You got up too soon," said Shayne.

"Stop mothering me! So I'll lie down. Do you know where Aunt Marie lives?"

Bannock gave the redhead his aunt's address and telephone number, adding, "Don't lose it—it's unlisted."

"I won't," Shayne promised. "But what's this African violet business? She didn't impress me as the type to raise flowers."

"She has a gardener for that." Bannock waved it away, hesitated, then added, "She's like a lot of other rich old broads I know—she collects young men. I don't have to tell you what kind."

"Okay." The redhead led him back to the outer office. "I'll call you the moment I'm through. And don't worry—I shan't start billing you till I'm on the job."

"I'm not worried." The big man smiled at Lucy, who looked like a cat about to purr, said, "I'll see you anyway tonight—both of you, I hope."

"Take care," Shayne told him. "And I'm not kidding." I don't want to lose a job before it starts."

"You're a cold-blooded son-of-a-bitch." Bannock's teeth

flashed in a grin as he left them. He looked slightly unsteady but righted himself as he passed through the door.

"He looks sick." Lucy was all concern. "Will he be all right?"

"You heard him tell me not to mother him, Angel."

"I hope he'll be okay." She looked misty-eyed and maternal. Then, coolly, to the redhead, "What's this about tonight, Mike? I thought we had a dinner date."

"We do," he said, "with him at the Pomme de Terre. I set it up yesterday."

"Oh, Mike!" she melted. "At that marvelous new restaurant?"

"I'm beginning to think it was a mistake," he told her, not wholly in jest. "I never saw you react like this to any man before."

"*What a man*!" She rested her chin on the back of folded hands, tilted her head, sighed. Then she stuck her tongue out at her employer. He was still smiling when he got into his car in the parking lot behind the old office building.

VIII

SHAYNE AND ROURKE all but collided going into the Pancake House, an above-average chain operation that offered the relative privacy of booths. The breakfast rush was over and they had no trouble obtaining a booth designed for larger groups.

After their coffee was served, supplemented in the lanky newsman's case by an order for a chicken-liver omelet and French rolls split and oven-browned, Rourke opened a large manila envelope and drew out a thick sheaf of Xerox sheets filled with small print.

"Come on, Tim," the redhead said. "You don't expect me to go through all that!"

With a smugly secretive grin, the reporter pulled a single sheet from the sheaf and handed it to Shayne, saying, "Cast your pearl grey orbs over that, my fine unfeathered friend."

"What is it?"

"The membership list of the Committee for the Anti-Corruption League."

Shayne glanced at it, saw the late Marve Richman's name at the top as legal counsel for CACL. Then, looking down the column of names, his eyes widened, only to narrow as their import sank home.

There, with a half dozen others listed in alphabetical order, were the names *Ella Armbruster, Harry Connors, Claire Daniels, David Larsen* and *Louise Smith*.

"My *God*!" Shayne exclaimed.

"It looks like the Fort Pillow massacre casuality list." He got up and slid out of the booth.

"Where are *you* going?" Rourke asked him.

"I'm going to call Will," said Shayne. "The police have got to have this. For all we know, the others are marked for murder."

"Sit down, Mike," said Rourke, "and finish your coffee. Do you really think *I* didn't think of that? I called Gentry before I called you."

"And. . . ?"

"They already have it," the reporter told him.

"When did they *get* it, Tim? And why didn't Will Gentry tell me?"

"Cool off and finish your coffee," said Rourke. "They only got it this morning. Len Sturgis brought it in with him."

"Why didn't he tell me, the black-hearted S.O.B.?"

"Because he didn't know he had it, Mike." The newsman leaned backward to allow the waitress to place a platter in front of him. Then, when the girl had gone, "I've been a busy little bee this morning."

"Okay, okay—but where did Len get it—and why didn't he know he had it?"

"It was locked in the luggage compartment of his car with a lot of other stuff he took from Claire Daniels' desk," said Rourke. "In case you've forgotten, she was the boutique personnel manager who got hers through the office window. Richman got Gentry to lock Len up so tight he couldn't get at what he got. Remember, the homes of the other victims were rifled before the police got there."

The redhead studied the list, lifted his head to say, "So that's why Len was framed—to keep him from getting hold of it. But this raises as many questions as it clears."

Rourke nodded, said, "I could ask a few myself—like why somebody wants them all dead."

"Good question," Shayne agreed. "But why were these particular people on this particular committee? They must have known each other—at least one or two of them—and nobody's been able to establish a link."

"I thought of that," said Rourke. "I even asked the assistant recorder about it."

"And. . . ?" the redhead asked when Rourke paused to shovel a heaping forkful of food into his mouth and wash it down with coffee.

"It's like this." Rourke mopped his mouth. "Anybody can put anyone else's name on a list and record it—but whoever does it better be sure it's for real or he'd better not publicize it. Otherwise, it's a felony with

heavy penalties and he's wide open for personal damage suits."

"You think the list's a phoney?"

"This jury is still out on that," said the reporter. "Marve Richman filed it about three weeks ago. There have been no beefs so far because it has not been used—except by name as backup clout for the Len Sturgis smear. Why would the County Auditor look at it? He gets hundreds of filings like this one."

"There has to be some other link," said the redhead, frowning. He looked at the list again, memorizing the names he had not seen before, said, "I'd like to know if Marve Richman knew what dynamite he was dealing with." Another pause, then, "He probably did—otherwise he'd never have framed Len Sturgis to keep him and the list locked up separately."

He frowned, then added, "Do you suppose any of the other victims had copies—apart from Claire Daniels?"

"Another good question, Mike—it's still up for grabs."

"I've got to find out." Shayne slapped the table so hard with his hand that the remnants of Rourke's omelet flattened a further quarter inch. "I've got to find out damned quick!"

"Easy, boy," said Rourke.

"Let the police handle it—they're fully alerted to its importance. Besides—" he paused, added "—a little bird told me that they're out looking for you, too, Mike. They want to question you further about Marve Richman's murder."

"Who does?" the redhead exploded the words like bullets.

"Len Sturgis, for one," the reporter told him. "He seems to think you've been holding out in the interests of collecting a fee from somebody else."

"Why, that—!" Shayne slapped the table again, then subsided to mutter, "You'd think he'd at least pay his own fee first, the cheapjohn."

"It takes one to know one," the reporter remarked.

Shayne ignored the shot, said, "Tim, lend me the keys to your car."

"And get hauled in for abetting a wanted man evade questioning?" Rourke fished in a side coast pocket.

"Tell them I twisted your arm. Thanks, Tim." He dropped his own car keys on the table top and made his way out of the Pancake House, stiffing the reporter with the check. After all, it was Tim Rourke who had done all the eating.

Getting Rourke's old Ford to start was always a touch-and-go process, but the redhead finally got the motor roaring. Compared to the smooth-engine-thrum of his own well-tuned Buick, it sounded like a bucket of bolts in a hurricane. The body creaked as he backed it out of the restaurant parking area and he wondered how long it had been since his friend had had it lubed.

There were a pair of items he had not confided to the reporter—items very much on his mind.

One was the fact that, under Ella Armbruster's name near the top of the list, was the listing *R.E.L. Barrett.* For a man who had lived in the South as long as the redhead, the initials could stand only for Robert Edward Lee, the great Confederate general whose name and memory were and are still revered south of the Mason and Dixon Line.

As for the Barrett, he had not forgotten that, the Bannocks had adopted the name during their joint career on the stage. Robert E. Lee Barrett—Lee Bannock. It had to be the giant developer, his new client.

The fact that Lee Bannock *was* his client was the second item he had failed to reveal to Rourke. At the moment, Shayne wanted to ask the wounded giant a few questions before continuing their business relationship.

The detective came close to running a red light and rear-ending a cream colored Bentley before he finally got the hang of controlling the reporter's temperamental gas buggy. More than once, he had heard Rourke describe his clunker as "a fine old clunker with some fine old quirks"—understatement if ever such had struck his ears.

While Shayne was not intimately acquainted with the zone in which Marie Bannock-Barrett-Wertham lived, he had a good working knowledge of the general area and had little trouble finding the address. It was in a neighborhood of smooth lawns and clipped hedges and stately palms and cypress set well back from the

highways which boxed it in.

Not new, but expensive when built and beautifully maintained ever since. It smacked of relatively old money—old for Miami at any rate as against the far older cities of the North and Northeast. He drove betrween a pair of whitewashed brick gateposts along a graveled driveway that led to a turnaround in front of a whitewashed brick house with blue slate roof, shutters and door, the last flanked by a pair of large bow windows.

When he rang the brass doorpull, it echoed melodiously from inside the house. Moments later, it was opened by a whippet-lean young man with bangs and a pale green jumpsuit, who regarded him with insolent lack of curiosity.

"I'm Mike Shayne," the redhead bluntly informed the young exquisite. "I'd like to see Lee Bannock."

"I'll see that he gets the message." The youth remained standing squarely in his path. "I'm afraid you can't see Mr. Bannock. He is not here."

"Very well," said the redhead. "I'll wait."

He pushed inside the house, found himself in a large entrance hall furnished with what, to his untutored eye, looked like genuine antiques. The young man retreated before him, moving like a ballet student in reverse gear.

All at once, he lifted a hand as if to make a karate chop at the side of the detective's neck. Shayne recognized the move and was ready for it. He lifted his left arm vertically to block the blow and, with his right hand, caught the foot aimed at his groin in a vicious kick.

He got both hands on the young man's ankle and gave it a twist, causing him to make a half-spin and utter a brief yelp of agony. His victim struggled to regain some sort of balance but, with another twist, the redhead made him yelp again—and this time he lifted his arms abruptly, sending his attacker flying halfway across the room to land on his hands and knees on the carpet.

A stream of gutter obscenities flowed from the loser's mouth as he pounded the Axminster beneath him in humiliation and fury. Even to Shayne, profanity hardened as he was, the young man's verbal filth was disturbing.

"I'll kick you inside out if you don't shut up, you crumb," he said, taking a stride toward the youth.

"There's no need for that," drawled a husky female voice from the doorway to his left. Come on in, Mike. *My*, but it's been a long time!"

IX

AS SHE LED Mike Shayne into a sunswept living room whose French windows looked out on a green lawn sloping gently toward a swimming pool backed by a tall hedge, she said over her shoulder, "You mustn't mind Hector, Mike. He's my self-appointed watchdog and tends to overdo the job with strangers."

"I wonder if his mother didn't bark." The detective seated himself in an armchair diagonally across a silver railed coffee table from the green-and-white striped sofa on which the former Marie Bannock gracefully ensconced herself.

Aunt Marie said, "Would you care for a drink—Martell and soda unless memory fails."

"A bit early in the day, Marie. "But if you'll join me?"

"Only slaves drink by the clock," she said, "and you and I are still free souls, praise Allah!"

In response to some silent signal, another lean young male ballet dancer type appeared, laid down a well equipped silver tray on the coffee table and departed, as he had appeared, wordlessly. But his dark eyes, resting briefly on Shayne's, were cold and expressionless as the eyes of a snake.

"Thank you, Carlos," Aunt Marie said silently as he turned to leave the room, then busied herself with the drinks.

The years, Shayne decided, had dealt kindly with Marie Bannock - Barrett - Wertham, wondering whether or not they had had an assist via plastic surgery. Her face, with its light blue eyes, wide sensual mouth and wide cheekbones, surrounded by a well groomed thicket of tawny hair, could have been the face of a woman of thirty—though he knew she had to be at least twenty years older.

Her long-legged, attractively angular dancer's body radiated animal vitality beneath the loose fitting silk brocade sheath that covered it. As she leaned toward him to offer the brandy and soda, her broad low forehead wrinkled in curiosity beneath her widow's peak.

"What do you think of my nephew, Mike?"

Shayne said, "I think he's one of the most attractive human beings I ever met."

"*Et tu, Brute?*" She sighed, added, "He has so much—looks, charm, brains, physique, that sometimes. . ." She let it hang.

The redhead put down his glass, said, "Sometimes what, Marie?"

"Sometimes I wonder if it hasn't been a little too easy for him. I wonder if he has enough

iron in his soul to stand up to the hard knocks ahead for all of us."

There seemed no answer to this, so the detective said, "How is he? When he left my office earlier this morning, he was not well."

"I know." The low forehead knotted again. "He told me about yesterday afternoon. *Horrible!*" She shuddered visibly, said, "Any other man would be flat on his back, but not Lee. It took all my efforts to get him to visit a doctor—and even then he refused to let any of us come with him."

"Where is he now?" the redhead asked. "I've got to talk to him. I suppose you know he just hired me."

"I was very glad to hear it after he told me about the shooting. He should be back any minute."

The minutes stretched to fifteen, then to twenty, then to twenty-five, while conversation between Shayne and Marie became more and more desultory. Finally, she rose briskly after finishing her drink and said, "I'm going to call the doctor right now."

She left the room with long graceful strides.

As she departed, the sunlight caught something that glinted round, flat and golden beneath the edge of the sofa where Marie had been sitting. It was a transient glitter, for even as he looked at it, the sunlight inexorably left it behind in its east-to-west orbit.

At any other time, in any other place, Shayne would have gone down on his hands and knees to investigate its source. But although he seemed alone in the luxurious living room since Marie's departure, he did not *feel* alone. A most uncomfortable, haunted feeling, a feeling he never enjoyed but had long since learned to heed.

So he sat where he was and awaited her return. She was back in less than five minutes, frowned prettily as she said, "I don't understand it—and I don't like it at all. Dr. Williamson says Lee never showed up."

Shayne was on his feet like a shot, said, "May I have the doctor's address?"

"Of course—I was going to ask you to check with him." She handed him a slip of paper on which address and phone number were already written.

Marie ascorted him to the door herself, thus sparing him another encounter with Hector or Carlos or any other of what her nephew called his Aunt Marie's "African violets." She said, "Please let me know when you find anything—no matter what."

He promised and took off, af-

ter another loud and prolonged argument with Tim Rourke's old Ford. It took him six minutes to reach a shopping intersection that offered public telephones.

He got through to Dr. Williamson himself with little delay. The physician sounded anxious, said, "You're the second person who has called about Mr. Bannock in the last few minutes."

"Who was the other?" Shayne asked.

"His aunt, Mrs. Wertham. She seemed quite disturbed about his not having been here."

"You're sure he hasn't?"

"*Positive!*" The physician hung up.

Shayne was tugging at the lobe of his left ear, lost in thought as he left the booth and went slowly toward Tim Rourke's Ford. Hence, as he walked along the sidewalk toward it, he was unaware of the black-and-yellow sedan moving slowly up behind him until it was almost alongside.

As it was, he was barely able to drop to the pavement so that the bullet from the silenced magazine pistol hummed barely over his head, to penetrate both windows of the phone booth he had left and ricochet with a *spang* off an iron pillar beyond.

Having hit the concrete, he kept rolling—toward the rear of the sedan, whose driver would have difficulty in hitting him with a second shot unless he leaned far out of the car, thus making himself a target. For a moment, he halted, then with a squeal of protesting rubber, was off and away.

But not before the redhead, having risen to one knee and drawn his Magnum from its shoulder holster, sent a shot winging accurately after him—a shot aimed neither at tires or driver but at the fuel tank nestled beneath the chrome of the rear bumper.

The redhead had no hope of keeping up in Tim's old rattletrap with the fast little modern car. But his quarry would leave a trail of gasoline as far as his punctured tank would permit him to travel—and Shayne had a good idea he would not be going far.

He saw the yellow-and-black car take an abrupt right turn on two wheels as he got into the Ford. As usual, it took him long frustrating moments to get it going and, by the time he reached the corner, the gasoline trail was almost obliterated by intervening tire treads and the hot midday sun. If he had not seen the car take the turn, he might have lost it entirely.

In the twisting, largely tree-shaded side-streets he found himself driving, the trail

gained in clarity. Shayne followed it doggedly, the Magnum lying flat across his thighs.

He wanted this man. In the moment of vision allowed him before he hit the concrete in the moment of his attempted assassination, he had noted that the gunman was hatless and that there was a strip of surgical adhesive tape running the length of his scalp.

It had to be the hit artist who had shot Marve Richman last night, the man who had come so close to killing the redhead in the late lawyer's home—the dude whose black tweed hat Shayne had shot from his head. This one, the detective had a personal motive for bringing to heel.

So intent was he on following the car that he all but rear-ended it as he swung aorund a blind curve. It had evidently run out of gas and rolled to a stop before its driver could pull over to the side of the road. He had the hood up and was bent over it, peering at the motor as the redhead braked to a fast stop.

X

IT WAS the screech of Tim Rourke's brakes that gave the stalled killer warning. He looked up and around, his mouth a ring of panic as he saw that Mike Shayne was all but on top of him. Leaping like a startled gazelle, he was around the front of the sedan, off and running, clearing a five-foot hedge alongside the road like an Olympic hurdler—or a trained ballet dancer.

Shayne's pursuit was less graceful. He crashed through the hedge, gun in hand, like a medium tank, ignoring scratches and scrapes, was in time to see his quarry vanish around the corner of a large stucco mansion at the other end of a brief carpet of lawn. Shayne kept after him, heard screams of alarm and rounded the house as a party of nude female

sunbathers grabbed for towel or bikini on the apron of a swimming pool.

The gunman crashed through a wooden gate at the far end, Shayne after him and gaining. By the time the redhead passed this barrier, the fleet assassin was nearing the far end of an alley sporadically lined with trash cans awaiting pickup. Lifting his revolver as he skidded to a halt, he sent a bullet winging head-high into the cinder-block wall past which the young man was racing.

Apparently, the ricochet struck his target—it spun him around into a trash can, brought both clattering to the brick alley pavement. He was lying there, sobbing for breath, when the redhead caught up with him.

Shayne picked him up by the scruff of the neck and shook him like a limp towel before holding him at arm's length and growling, "All right, you little punk—*talk*!"

The youth's once-furrowed scalp was bleeding afresh from a furrow above his right ear, but his little dark eyes were twin pools of hatred.

He said, "You'd never have made it if we'd had time to set you up."

"Like the others?" Shayne asked.

The young man's mouth clamped shut. His eyes closed and he went limp in the detective's angry grip. Shayne uttered a disgusted four-letter word and relaxed his hold on the nape of the limp killer's neck.

With a violent twist, worthy of an acrobat, his captive wrenched free, pivoted swiftly, gracefully, and forced the redhead to stumble backward to avoid a vicious kicked delivered accurately to the spot where his gun hand had been an instant earlier. Then the youth was off and running once more, this time through an iron-bound wooden gate to the right of the alley.

Before the redhead could stop him again, the gate was slammed shut in his face and he heard the metallic sound of a bolt being drawn. From somewhere in the distance, he could hear the rise and fall of police sirens growing in volume.

Shayne rammed his rump hard into the gate but it did not give. It would take a battering ram to break through it. He paused briefly, then ran back to Tim Rourke's old car, deciding it had already taken enough batterings in its long, ill-driven life to endure one more.

Mercifully, for once, its motor caught quickly. The detective pulled it to the alley's left until its front bumper scraped the

wall, then cut sharply to the right and pushed the gas pedal hard, down to the ragged floor.

There was no room to ram it head-on into the bolted gate, but the sudden leap it gave brought the right end of the front bumper into violent contact with the edge of the barrier opposite its hinges. The old Ford stalled, but the heavy iron-bound wooden gate gave under the impact.

Shayne got it going again, backed it up, drove forward a second time. There was jarring, rending, crunching contact, and the gate swung back. Shayne scrambled out and edged his way through the narrow gap that had opened. As he expected, he was at the foot of a sloping lawn, facing a swimming pool. Beyond, at the top of the gentle rise, stood a white brick house with blue slate roof and blue shutters and a row of French windows.

His attacker had squared the circle and, under pressure, fled back to Marie's house for cover. . .

There was little time for Shayne to enjoy the view or consider a course of action. He was forced to drop flat on his face and roll on the grass for cover behind a power lawn roller as a trio of high-velocity bullets *spanged* into the alley wall behind him, to be followed by the dull ugly short sounds of silenced pistol fire.

The wail of the sirens grew louder as police pursuit turned into the alley. Shayne gathered himself for the next move.

From his knowledge of the characters he was after, the redhead was quite sure Lee Bannock would not be alive by the time the police reached the house—and it was essential to him that the big developer remain alive.

He was quite certain Bannock was in there—after all, the huge blond from California had informed him, at the office, that he was going to put in some time with his Aunt Marie.

Then, there was the odd matter of the supposed telephone call to Dr. Williamson. This had led to Shayne's leaving the house and to his near-assassination in the pay-phone booth.

Finally, there was the little golden glint of some small flat object caught by the sunlight as it lay under the front edge of Aunt Marie's sofa. During the short time he had viewed it, he had thought it to be a gold coin, had wondered why a goldpiece should have been left lying there in a room so immaculately maintained.

Now his memory kicked backward to Bannock's visit to his office that morning. He

could visualize the developer's shapphire blue blazer with its gilt buttons. He felt certain the bright disc lying under Marie's sofa had become detached from her nephew's jacket.

It added up to eight to one that Bannock was still in the house. The problems were—in what condition and how to get him out?

Another pair of bullets bounced off the lawn roller and whined out of earshot. If Shayne were to get Lee Bannock out alive, the power-roller seemed providential. He tried pushing it, but it remained immovable. Not good. Careful to keep his head down behind the steel seat it offered its rider under less metallic auspices, he reached gingerly for a starter switch. He found it, turned it on, got under cover barely in time to avoid having his left hand shot off.

Still the roller wouldn't move. He risked another quick peek, found the brake handle, released it—and the roller started up the gentle slope of the lawn toward the house with its French windows. The redhead had to scramble to keep its bulk between him and the deadly African violets who were firing at him.

As the roller progressed toward the mansion, he became aware that the bullets fired at him were coming closer, from a wider angle. At first he thought that a flanking movement was in progress and peered quickly around the left end of the moving improvised shield.

Only then did he discover that, thanks to the slope, the roller was turning slowly to the right—and that he had no chance of controlling its direction unless he got up in the seat where he could grip the steering wheel. This was equivalent to inviting instant death.

The firing halted, but his position remained desperate for, end on, his shield would not give him sufficient cover. He decided his only recourse was a rush from the left end of the roller, a direction which which—he hoped—such an attack would be least expected.

Crouching, he gathered himself to spring. He was within twenty feet of the French windows now and, once he gained the house, figured he would have some chance of survival in the confusion that must follow his entry, shooting.

"I always knew you were trouble, you bastard."

Directly to his left, Aunt Marie was standing, a half-smile on her still handsome face. She was aiming an automatic that looked big as a cannon to Shayne, aiming it di-

rectly at his head, holding it in both hands. She was less than fifteen feet away.

The French door on her left, which was closed, suddenly shattered outward, and a big, big man in a light blue turtleneck sweater and grey flannel slacks flung himself head first through the air in a dive that knocked Aunt Marie flat on her face while her pistol described a slow parabola in the air.

At that moment, the constabulary came swarming through the broken gate in the rear while sounds of other police activity echoed from the front of the house.

Lee Bannock picked himself up, retrieved Aunt Marie's automatic and tossed it to Shayne. He said, "Thanks, Mike."

"Why thank me?" the detective countered. "You saved my life."

"If you hadn't come back and launched that one-man attack of yours, I'd never have got out of the bind I was in to make the move."

"Lee, you're bleeding," said Shayne, pointing at the giant's right side.

Bannock looked down, said, "Son of a bitch—so I am. I must have opened the stitching."

With that, his eyes rolled upward and he passed out in a dead faint.

XI

LUCY HAMILTON and Mike Shayne did not have their dinner date at the Pomme de Terre with Lee Bannock until the following Wednesday evening. Len Sturgis, looking more at peace with the world than Shayne had ever seen him, was the fourth member of the quartet that gathered in a small private dining room of the luxurious new French restaurant.

Not until the *crêpes Suzettes* had been discreetly replaced by cognac and coffee did the conversation turn to the one-woman crime wave that had brought them together. It was Lee Bannock, looking somewhat drawn but otherwise little the worse for his five-day hospital ordeal, who introduced the topic that was foremost in all their minds.

"You know," he told them, "that damned aunt of mine had the whole thing set up for more than a year. Longer, perhaps, since it was she who really induced me to move here from California and steered me toward the Crestonville site."

Lucy said, "I may be stupid, but I still don't understand her motives. After all, she was relatively rich and you were making a tremendous success."

"That," said Bannock, "is not

because you're stupid, but because you don't understand Aunt Marie. She's had a big power drive all her life and very few scruples. That's why she and my father broke up their act while they were still on top. He couldn't stand her trying to run him and he couldn't stomach her methods."

"I'll buy that," said Shayne. "But one thing that still bugs me is why she put her intended victims on that committee list. . .and why she put your name on it. Was she planning to kill you even then?"

"Who knows?" Bannock shrugged. "My guess is that she told that damned shyster of hers she didn't want her name on it—and that he put the others on as a means of retaliation in case she turned on him after the killings began. I don't suppose it occurred to him it would ever be uncovered unless he did it himself."

"That fits," Len Sturgis nodded. "Actually, he didn't file the list with the County Recorder's office until *after* the murders began. We believe it was planted as a safeguard. He sent copies to all the intended victims once he saw what was happening, probably as a sop to his own conscience."

"If he had one," said Lucy.

"A moot point," said the redhead, smiling.

Sturgis said, "Chief Gentry is still red hot about having his office bugged."

"I've been wondering about that," said Shayne.

"It was one of those dear little boys of hers," the Homicide captain replied. "They were loaded with cute little tricks as you gentlemen have occasion to know. One of them got in with a delegation of college Civics students and planted a bug under the Chief's desk while he was being presented with a plaque. They had it hooked up to a radio outlet and could pick it up at the old lady's house."

"So *that's* why you got framed!" said Shayne.

Sturgis nodded. "The moment they heard I'd got hold of Claire Daniels's papers, Marve Richman went into action. Even the Chief says it's one of the fastest, shrewdest setting-up jobs he ever heard of."

Len Sturgis seemed to take pride in the fact that it had taken no mere ordinary frame to sideline him. Lucy put down her coffee cup and looked at him curiously.

"Captain," she said, "I thought our mayor was a relatively honest man."

"He is," Sturgis assured her.

"Then why did he let himself be dragged into it—even indirectly?"

The three men exchanged a

knowing glance before the Homicide captain replied.

"Let's put it this way—Marve Richman was a behind-the-scenes fixer. He controlled the allocation of a great deal of campaign money. I don't know how he presented the problem of getting me out of the way—neither does the Chief—but he made it urgent enough to get me put on ice for a few critical days. It's a lot better buried for everyone."

There was a long pause ended by Shayne's, "Amen to that!"

"And to think," said Lucy, "that the whole horrible business came out of an old will!"

"Wars have been fought over old wills, Angel," said the redhead. "The Tontine, with everything going to the last surviving legatee, has always been an invitation to murder on a lesser scale."

"Poor old Cress was only trying to see that somebody got something out of the property," said Lee Bannock. "He bought all that acreage and originally called it Cress Town after himself. He figured it would boom right after World War Two and got a number of small investors to put their savings into it."

Bannock paused, then added, "He must have been on the level—but like a lot of us developers, he was way ahead of

his time. When he was broke and dying, he willed it to them."

"Including Aunt Marie," said Lucy.

"Including Aunt Marie. The rest of them either forgot about it or never knew they were left a share. The younger ones were children of the original investors at the time."

Shayne said, "Did she have it in mind all along?"

"Probably," Bannock replied. "I don't mean the murders necessarily. But she pointed me toward Crestonville from the moment I first came here from California to look around. And, dammit, she was right! When

she saw how big it was going to be, I'm afraid she couldn't bear the thought of sharing all that loot with a lot of people she neither knew nor cared about. I don't know who or what actually turned her killer—but those Violets of hers. . .".

He let it hang, added with a massive shudder, "They sure scared hell out of me. It could have been one of them."

"Could be," said Sturgis. "A psychotic effeminate can be deadlier than either the female or the male."

"You're telling *me*!" The developer shuddered again. "I've got the scar to prove it. If I hadn't been sidelined, that fool Avery Cole would have kept his fat mouth shut and not blown the election."

"Will that matter?" Shayne asked.

Bannock shook his massive blond head. "Not in the long run—though it *will* shave profits slightly for a few years. But the minority groups will get a lot fairer shake from me than they would have from Aunt Marie if she had got me out of the way. You can make book on that."

"What's going to happen to her?" Lucy Hamilton asked.

Len Sturgis picked up the ball, saying, "She'll be put away for a while, but my hunch is she'll manage to lay most of the guilt on the late Marve Richman. He was in it with her, all right."

"You know, Len," said Shayne, "I'm still baffled by the timing of Richman's murder—his being shot while I was on my way to see him."

"It was no coincidence." said Sturgis "Your little Violet buddy talked. You called Richman from The Beef House—right?"

"Right," said Shayne.

"Well, Richman called Marie. He was getting up tight over the murders and threatened to talk to you if she didn't pull the string. So she sent a little Violet over to make sure he didn't."

"I'm going to sleep a lot more soundly with Aunt Marie under lock and key," said Bannock. "And now I'm going to propose a toast to the man who got it done." He rose, lifted his glass, said, "That's you, you redheaded Irish bastard. *Thanks*!" He grinned at Mike Shayne.

The other two rose and drank with him and even Len Sturgis added a sincere, *"Amen!"*

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every issue!

A Needle In a Haystack

THE NEW VICTOR FIALA SHORT NOVEL

His colleagues thought that Fiala was growing too old to carry on with a detective's work. But, in his unassuming way, Fiala outthought, outdrank and outhustled the ambitious younger men after his job.

by HAL ELLSON

IN THE GHOST-GLARE of the headlights the road unreeled in a white, undulating strip; noth ing else existed but the unending blackness of the desert plateau. The driver of the giant trailer-truck, Miguel Melendez, leaned forward on the wheel, his crusty bronzed face lined with fatigue.

A fast-five-hundred mile run from the south, with but two brief stops along the way, was taking its toll. To bring the trailer through on time was a man's job. A cargo of papaya was riding in back of him, huge golden fruit of the south for the sleeping city lost in this terrible, unending blackness.

Never before had it bothered him. There'd been nothing to fear on this lonely highway, but now, somewhere ahead, death might be waiting for him. Two drivers had been murdered in the past month. "*No hitchhikers. Stop for no one.*" Those

had been his instructions. As if he needed them.

The huge trailer thundered on into the blackness. Far ahead, lay Montes. If all went well, coming out of the mountains, he would see the lights of the city burning in the first faint glow of dawn.

But now there was nothing but unending blackness and the strip of white road fixed in the headlights; then slowly the transition took place. Black turned to grey and a stark-empty landscape emerged on each side of the road with mountains erupting in the distance while ahead a hazy glow rose from the lights of the metropolis.

With luck, he'd soon be there, but now he was approaching the trouble spot. The road dropped sharply, and a series of sharp curves awaited him. The trailer thundered toward the first one and rounded it at a speed too hazardous to be taken again.

The next curve was shaping now, a sharper turn—and beyond it? Melendez called on the Virgin for help, swung the wheel, made the turn and groaned aloud, for a boulder lay directly in his path. To leave the road-bed and try to by-pass it, would be insane. He applied the brakes, which was a mistake and fatal, for on each side of the road, rising like ghosts in the grey light, the killers appeared.

"AS SWEET as sugar," the waitress said, setting the big plate of papaya before Detective Victor Fiala.

"Not this morning. Take it away," Fiala answered.

"Is it your stomach again, senor?"

"Something like that."

Shrugging, the waitress left him, and the screen-door opened. A man dressed in a fine-cut suit entered the restaurant. He was Pedro Otero, prosperous owner of the Blue Moon. Fiala arose and walked toward him. Greetings were exchanged, then Otero said, "Is something wrong, Victor?"

Fiala shrugged, then nodded to the door. Beyond the dark net of the screen a long Cadillac glistened in the sunlight. "A new car?" he said.

Otero smiled. "A beautiful job, no?"

"The best. Congratulations." Fiala paid the cashier, stepped outside and paused to admire the big car. For a fellow who once shined shoes in the plaza, he thought, Otero's doing all right. He started to move off when a voice from behind halted him. He turned and saw Captain Meza. "Victor," he said.

"Yes? I take it the Chief arrived at headquarters?"

"With bells on. He sent me to get you. Better hurry. He's in a nasty mood."

"I know. I saw the paper." Wearily, Fiala crossed to police headquarters, going directly to the Chief's office.

Lopez leaned across his desk and scowled as Fiala steppéd into his office. "I hope you enjoyed your coffee," he said.

"Not this morning, senor. Another driver was murdered."

"At least you know about that, if nothing else."

The barb stung and Fiala winced. "It's your last chance," Lopez went on. "Break this thing up or you're finished. Do I make myself clear?"

"Very clear."

"Good. That's all."

Fiala went to the door and paused. Should he hand in his resignation now and avoid the embarrassment of being told he was finished? "Is something on your mind?" Lopez said, raising his eyes.

"Nothing, senor."

Captain Meza grinned when Fiala sat down on the bench across the room from him. "Lopez gave you the ultimatum?" he said.

"But what else?"

"And you let that bother you when he's pulled it a dozen times?"

"I'm tired of his threats."

"Or just tired, Victor? That happens when one begins to get old."

"I'm very tired, a little too old, but not quite finished."

"Don't clear this one and you will be," Meza answered, thrusting the knife deeper into the wound.

"There's the rub. I expect to clear it."

"That'll be difficult, if it can be done at all."

Fiala nodded and stood up. "You were at the scene this morning?"

"Naturally."

"Find anything?"

"Not much. The truck was taken—and the driver shot in back of the head. Apparently he tried to make a run for it."

"The first two drivers were stabbed," Fiala recalled, "and the trucks were left on the highway, but it's probably the same gang operating."

"The same," Meza agreed, "and I still think it's those Indians who live nearby. They're a mean bunch."

"Because they haven't anything to say?"

"You should know, Victor. Are you going to confer with them?"

"I'll get as much as I got here, perhaps a little more," Fiala answered and went out the door.

II

BLUE-BELLS edged the highway and carpeted the spaces between the rows of orange trees in the groves beyond the city. The countryside here was lush and beautiful, but soon the groves and blue-bells gave way to an arid landscape dominated by mesquite and cacti and the highway lifted into the lonely foothills.

Beyond a sharp curve, Fiala braked his car and got out. Was this the point where the trailer-driver had been murdered? Twenty paces from the car a large oil-spot stained the road. The trailer had halted here—but why?

Again, Fiala looked about. A boulder beside the road caught his eye, and there was the evidence in the dust—marks showing it had been moved from its place. A cigarette lay beside it. He picked it up, smelled it, dropped it in his pocket and continued his search. At three points he stopped to pick up more cigarettes; four more he found across the road, then, sharp as a knife, the feeling came that someone was observing him.

Turning, he saw a man squatting beside the boulder at the side of the road. Thin-faced, with stubble on his chin and his clothes almost rags, the peon watched him approach, then stood up. Fiala greeted him, offered him a cigarette and asked if he knew what had taken place here that morning.

"A man was killed," the peon answered.

"You saw it happen?"

"No, senor."

"Did you see anything at all?"

The peon shrugged, and Fiala reached into his pocket and took out a ten-peso note. The bait worked; the old man pointed south with a leathery hand.

"I was around the bend when the trailer passed," he said. "I heard it stop. A shot was fired, and the truck came back. That's what I saw."

Fiala handed over the ten-peso note, and suddenly the old fellow pointed across the road. Light flashed off a huge cactus. From a mirror? Fiala wondered. The object was much odder than that, he discovered, on reaching the cactus.

It was a photograph of a girl lying naked on a bed—a common pornographic shot, but bizarrely pinned and pierced at two points by the sharp spines of the cactus. In the dust below lay another cigarette. Picking it up, Fiala smelled it, dropped it in his pocket, then carefully plucked the photograph from its spiny perch and turned it over.

There was a scrawled message in back and, squinting, he made it out: "Don't forget the hundred-pesos, Luis."

The senoritas never forget the cash, he thought and, turning about, saw nothing but cacti and mesquite standing motionless in the burning sunlight, for the old man had vanished. There were more questions he'd wanted to ask, but it was too late now. He returned to his car and examined the photograph again. The girl was smiling, her arms out-stretched in invitation. A nice body and pretty face, he thought, but the pose? Pocketing the photograph, he drove back to Montes.

Wheeling into the big plaza in front of the Cathedral, he felt pleased with himself; things were falling into place and so easily. Round the plaza the big car rolled past the empty benches; jacarandas were wilting in the blinding white light, the fountains pluming, then suddenly all turned dark. Blinded by a stabbing pain in his head, he jammed the brakes and, behind him, wheels screeched; another car swept past, the driver swearing at the top of his lungs.

Fiala slumped forward on the wheel, then raised his head. All was still black, then suddenly the fierce white light returned and he saw the Municipal building weaving before him, the narrow shadowed structure beside it. Bracing himself, he started the car, drove into the shadowed street, halted again and stumbled from the car. A hand caught his arm.

CAPTAIN MEZA

"Are you all right, Victor?" a policeman asked.

"All right. Thanks." The hand dropped from his arm and Fiala made his way through a high arch into a cool patio over-looked by balconies. After pausing there, he climbed to the lower balcony and entered the Chief's office.

"Back already? What happened?" Lopez said.

"A little too much sun, I guess, but I'm all right now. I went out to the place where the trailer-driver was murdered."

"A waste of time. Meza could have given you the facts."

"Even the ones he missed?" the Chief asked.

"Then you found something?"

"Not too much. It's a gang operation. Seven members."

"Is that a guess?"

"I found places where they waited for the trailer," Fiala explained and dipped into his pocket. A handful of cigarettes dropped on the desk. He broke open one and held it under the Chief's nose.

"Marijuana," Lopez said.

Fiala nodded, dropped it in the waste-basket and swept the others after it. "Tobacco in those," he said. "The gang-leader smoked the weed. A tall fellow. The others are short."

"You even know their measurements?"

"Roughly. I saw the marks of their bodies in the dust. The tall one was closest to the point where the trailer halted."

"And perhaps you know how the hi-jackers stopped it when the driver had orders to keep moving?"

"They rolled a boulder onto the highway. It was as simple as that."

"And what else do you know?"

"The trailer was taken south."

"Back to where it came from?" the Chief asked.

"Hardly."

"What about Flores?"

Fiala shrugged. "A hundred-mile drive? They wouldn't chance it."

"Then perhaps they didn't go south."

"The trailer was seen going in that direction."

Lopez sat with a grin on his face. "You have a witness?"

"An old man heard the shot that killed the driver. He saw the trailer drive away."

"And where's the old man?" Lopez asked.

Fiala flushed and shrugged. "I'm afraid I lost him."

"Lost him?"

"Exactly. He appeared out of nowhere and vanished when I turned my back," Fiala explained, producing the photograph. "The old fellow brought this to my attention. When I went for it . . . "

Lopez snatched the picture from his hand, examined it and said, "Is this your idea of a joke?"

"Hardly. Take a closer look. Notice the holes? The spines of a cactus made them, and it wasn't an accident that they punctured the senorita at those vital spots. It's my guess that the one who did this has something against her. He was the one who smoked the weed. Also, his name may be Luis."

Lopez raised his brows at this, and Fiala smiled. "Please look on the other side of the photograph," he said.

"*Don't forget the hundred-pesos, Luis,*" Lopez quoted and looked up, shaking his head. "You made it look so simple, as far as you went, and I was almost taken in, but it's the other way around. You were taken in, Victor. The old man conveniently appeared to help you find this picture and confuse you."

"I'm afraid I'm not confused."

"Not much. You expect to find someone called Luis and a trailer that went in any direction but south. You were taken in, and that's why the old man vanished."

"Too complicated," Fiala said, laughing outright. "Even if they had the brains, the hijackers wouldn't bother to set up anything like that. As for the old man, if he was in on the business, why didn't he appear this morning when Captain Meza appeared on the scene? That would have been the proper time."

Taken back, Lopez caught himself and said, "Why did the old man disappear? Answer that one, Victor?"

"I can't, but he was an Indian, so who can say what he had in mind?"

"Then you intend to look for this Luis and the trailer?"

"We'll forget the trailer. Like the others, it'll be found unloaded. The cargo's another matter. As for Luis, it'll probably be easier to locate his girlfriend."

Lopez sat back, picked up the photograph and studied it. "Do you expect to find her in the District?" he asked.

"Possibly, but she may be in a 'house', or on her own somewhere in the city."

"In that case, you'll be looking for a needle in a haystack."

"I know." Fiala took back the photograph and went to the door. "In that case," he echoed, "it may be easier to find the one who snapped the picture."

"Find him and you may find the girl. Find the girl and you may find Luis. It sounds simple, but where do you look for a man who takes such pictures?"

Fiala shrugged. "I'm not sure, but a few questions in the right place and someone may come up with the answer," he said and went out the door.

III

"YOU LOOK ten years younger," Captain Meza said when Fiala stepped into his office. "What happened?"

"Nothing, my friend."

"If someone else said that, I'd take him at his word, but you?" Meza shook his head. "You've got something up your sleeve, haven't you?"

"Such as an ace? You may be

right, Captain. Take a look at this," Fiala answered and out came the photograph.

Meza studied it and said, "An excellent exposure, but I fail to see the ace."

"The girl has a friend called Luis."

"So?"

"So." Fiala pocketed the photograph. "Luis is the ace, the leader of the hi-jackers."

"You're serious, Victor?"

"Nothing but. Now all I have to do is find Luis. It won't be easy but, at least, I'm not in the dark any more," Fiala said and suddenly laughed when he saw the expression on Meza's face. "Ah, you think I'm pulling your leg. Nothing of the kind." He patted the pocket where he'd put the photograph. "This is the real thing, and if it hadn't been for one of those Indios you dislike so much, I'd have missed it the same as you did."

"You mean you picked that up where the murder took place?"

"Correct, and now I'm going to look up the girl. It should be an interesting meeting."

"You may get more than you want of one thing, and less than you expect of the other," Meza said sourly. "Those kind don't talk freely."

"The proper approach and all of them do," Fiala grinned. "Anyhow, I'll make a gallant try."

"You're really feeling good, aren't you?"

"Ten years younger, to quote you. And now I'm off to the Black Cat. In case anyone's looking for me, Captain . . ." Smiling at Meza's evident discomfort, Fiala moved to the door and shot his last barb: "I'll carry your regards to the senorita."

"Make sure we don't have to carry you back here on a board," Meza snapped, and out the door went Fiala. Once in the hot sun, the smile faded from his face; he'd goaded Meza, but that was over now. There'd be no monkey-business with the senorita. As for the Black Cat, his mission at the cantina was strictly in the line of business.

Pancho, the proprietor of the Black Cat, raised his brows when Fiala stepped up to the bar. "You're not working, Victor?" he said.

"Don't mention the word. It gives me the chills."

"Always joking. What'll it be?"

"Nothing."

"Then you are working. I see the hi-jackers killed another trailer-driver, but it couldn't be that."

In answer, Fiala produced the photograph of the girl. "Ever

see this one before, Pancho?"

"Who knows? I've seen so many like it I couldn't tell the difference."

"Could Don Pedro have taken it?"

"I doubt it, unless he's making those on the side to amuse himself, but why not ask him?" Pancho pointed to a table where four elderly men sat. Heavy drinkers who'd had too much already, they looked up as Fiala appeared before them.

"Don Pedro, if you don't mind, I'd like a word with you in private," Fiala said.

"Why not, Victor?" Don Pedro answered, lifting his glass and rising to his full height. He was a mere five-foot, bald, very frail, but a gargantuan drinker. Making his way to an empty table, he sat down. "All right, here's your privacy," he laughed. "What's so secret?"

Fiala placed the photograph on the table, and Don Pedro perked up. "Not bad," he noted and shrugged. "But I've a hundred better ones."

"Did you make that one?" the detective asked.

Don Pedro sat back, serious now. Drunk as he was, he smelled trouble and shrugged again.

"That's no answer," Fiala said. "Either you made it, or you didn't."

"Hm, I could have," Don Pedro conceded, examining the photograph again. "It's possible, senor."

"And the girl. Do you know who she is?"

"No, senor."

"Come off it. You engaged her, took her picture, paid her and don't know her name."

"But I don't, Victor. She was one of many. I don't ask their names. I snap their pictures and that's it. They put on their clothes and leave."

"Just like that." Fiala shook his head. "I know you better, and I'm sure they don't fly out the door."

Don Pedro laughed. "Not the prettier ones," he admitted, "and not if I can help it. But I don't ask their names."

"Then you don't know this girl?"

"No, senor."

"When did you take the picture?"

"No, senor."

"When did you take the picture?"

"A month, perhaps two months ago." Don Pedro shrugged.

"And there's nothing you can tell me about her?"

"What is there to tell? A beginner. You can see what she is and where she'll end."

"She's in trouble already," Fiala said, thinking of the points where the cactus spines had pierced the photograph.

"What kind of trouble, Victor?"

"Someone means her harm, I suspect. He's a bad actor, possibly a murderer."

"And you want to save her from him?"

"More, I want to know who he is. If I can find her, I may find him."

"Then the man you want to see is Antonio Gomez, the guide. He's the one who sends the girls to me. Perhaps he knows this one's name."

"Many thanks," Fiala said with awry grin. "But you could have given me this information sooner."

"If you had asked, I'd have done so," Don Pedro replied, picking up his glass.

IV

ANTONIO GOMEZ was a shadowy character, a guide without a license who'd do anything for a peso. Fiala knew him well and expected to find him at his usual station, the main doorway of the Hotel de los Reyes where he waited like a hungry vulture for most of his clientele—tourists from the States who looked for questionable entertainment. Gomez wasn't at the hotel, but a taxi-driver, Carlos Rios, had seen him earlier.

"He's working?" Fiala asked.

Rios grinned. "On a drunken tourist who wanted a woman, so you know where to find him."

He meant the District, a hell-hole and the inevitable destination of all male tourists who didn't know any better. It was a place Fiala preferred to avoid if the choice were his. It wasn't now, and he drove off to the District.

The ride was like a trip to the Bottomless Pit, the streets rutted and filthy, the houses that lined them rotting, decrepit shacks. In the midst of this horror, like an open running sore, lay the District with its bedlam of cantinas and "houses", a false paradise with false promises and Eves offering poisoned apples.

In this area where a stranger could easily lose himself and a friend could search long to find him, where would Gomez take the drunken tourist? A cantina first, to ply him with more drinks. With the streets rutted so deep, Fiala drove at a snail's-pace and stopped before each cantina but saw no sign of Gomez' rattle-trap car. Next came the houses where the girls waited for their clients. Turning a corner, there at the far-end of the street stood Gomez' car.

Driving up to it, Fiala braked and got out. There was no sign

of Gomez, but as he stepped to the sidewalk, a woman greeted him from a doorway. "Looking for the tourist, Senor Fiala?" she said and, pointing to the next door, laughed.

Nodding, Fiala moved on and stopped at the wretched entrance of the next hovel. Should he wait, or disturb the tourist? Duty before accomodation, he thought, and knocked. When no one answered, he opened the door. It was dim inside, the room like a crypt, with but a single item of furniture, a bed; a man was sprawled face-down across it. Dead? Fiala wondered, and turned him over.

The man was breathing heavily, there was an ugly swelling on his forehead and his pockets had been turned out. Fiala slapped his face and he opened his eyes. "What happened?" the man mumbled.

"Yes, what happened, senor. Where's the girl?"

"Girl?"

"She was here, wasn't she?" he said.

The tourist rubbed his swollen forehead. "She was," he nodded.

Fiala took the photograph from his pocket and held it up. "Recognize her?" he asked.

The tourist stared at it and shrugged. "It could be the girl, but I only saw her for a second and then the roof fell in," he said, then suddenly grabbed for his pockets.

"Too bad, but you've been taken," Fiala said. "Next time be more careful or, at least, stay sober."

Nodding, the tourist stood up and the two of them stepped outside. "You came in that?" Fiala said, nodding to Gomez' car.

"Yes."

"Where's the guide?"

"Who knows, but if I get my hands on him . . . "

"I'll take care of that. Now, was he the one who struck you?"

The tourist started to nod, then shook his head. "Someone inside," he said. "I got hit when I closed the door."

Another man involved? Perhaps the tourist was confused, or maybe there was a second party. "That one will be taken care of also," Fiala said and, leading the tourist to his car, he helped him in. "I'll drive you back to your hotel if you'll be kind enough to wait," he said and turned away.

The woman who'd greeted Fiala was still standing in her doorway. Going to her, he asked if she'd seen Gomez and she told him to look on one of the bars at the corner, pointing the direction.

There were four bars there, and in the second one he en-

tered he found Gomez. "Let's go outside," he said.

"Something's wrong, Victor?"

"We'll discuss that outside."

"As you wish."

In the street, Fiala said, "You're in trouble, Gomez. Your customer got the business."

"Not from me," Gomez protested.

"Not directly, but you steered him into the trap."

"No, senor. He saw the girl standing in the doorway and ordered me to stop, so I stopped and let him out."

"And came here for a drink," Fiala said.

"To while away the time. Why not? I was going back to pick him up."

"That won't be necessary. He's in my car, with a lump on his head like an egg that you know nothing about."

"If he was rolled, I had nothing to do with that."

The truth? Fiala shrugged and said, "What about the girl? Do you know her?"

"Does anyone know all of them in the District?"

Fiala smiled. "But you'd recognize her if you saw her?"

"I don't know. She was standing in the doorway when the tourist got out of the car. I paid no attention to her."

Fiala produced the photograph. "Is this the girl?" he asked.

"Perhaps, but I couldn't swear to it."

"You never saw her before?"

"Never."

"Nor the photograph?"

"No," Gomez said.

"But you peddle them."

"As you well know, senor."

"And you don't remember her face?"

Gomez smiled. "Does one study the faces in those kind of pictures? Ask the tourist to describe the girl in the set I sold him and you'll see what I mean."

"I see what you mean," Fiala said. "My apologies for disturbing you, but a word of warning. Next time, take better care of your charge or you'll find yourself in the lockup." That delivered, he went back to the woman who directed him to Gomez and nodded to the hovel next door. "Do you know the girl working in there?" he asked.

"She calls herself Carmen," the woman said. "She's a new one, a young snip. Ei, the men like them like that, when they don't know what it's all about."

Professional jealousy? Fiala reached for the photograph in his pocket but a sound behind him brought him about. The tourist, his head hanging from the car, was heaving up. Excusing himself, Fiala hurried to the car and the tourist raised his head. His eyes were glazed,

and blood was running from his ears and nostrils.

Twenty minutes later Fiala delivered the dying man to a hospital, then drove to the small plaza behind headquarters and went for coffee in the Blue Moon. A waitress brought him black coffee and said, "Another headache, senor?"

"A big one."

"My sympathy," she said, and the screen-door opened. Heels clicking on tile, Captain Meza came to Fiala's table. "Taking it easy, Victor?" he said.

"Do you think so, Captain?"

"It's not what I think, but if the Chief walked in . . . "

"Coffee, senor?" The waitress was back. The Captain nodded, and grinned at Fiala. "Black coffee for a black mood," he said. "You must have run into trouble."

"A little, but I'm sure you're doing all right."

"A little trouble also, my friend," Meza said.

"You interrogated the Indians again, no doubt, and they had nothing to say."

"Right, but did the girl in the photograph talk?"

"Almost, Captain."

"What does that mean?"

Fiala described what had happened in the District, and Meza grinned. "But how do you know it's the girl?" he said. "You didn't see her, and neither

the tourist or the Gomez could identify her."

"I'll admit the tourist couldn't but Gomez is another matter. His word means nothing."

"But if he knows her, why would he deny it?"

"That's what I was thinking, Captain."

"If," said Meza. "And 'if' again for the photograph, which means nothing at all but a wild idea of yours."

"A wild idea is better than none at all."

"I'll admit that it's good exercise for the imagination, and also that stuff about Gomez. If he knew the girl and brought the tourist to her to be taken, he wouldn't have gone for a drink."

"Probably not," Fiala al-

lowed, shrugging and rising from the table. "I'll have to find another lead, I suppose. Enjoy your coffee, Captain."

"Good hunting, Victor."

V

"DR. FERNANDEZ?" Pancho, the robust owner of the Black Cat, opened a small Carta Blanca for Fiala and carefully poured the golden brew into a glass. "I haven't seen him today, but he'll be in."

"Sober, I hope."

"Are you joking, Victor?"

Fiala emptied half the glass and rested it. "I mean sober enough to talk sense."

"But doesn't he always?"

"In a way, yes. In another way, no, but he's not here, so I'll wait."

"Something's brewing, Victor?"

"Plenty. I'm looking for the girl in the photograph I showed you."

"Then Fernandez is your boy." Pancho shook his head. "A brilliant fellow like that wasting his talent on those girls. No wonder he's always drunk."

"Someone had to do the job, Pancho."

The big man shrugged. "The trouble is he mixes business with pleasure, and a bull couldn't take care of all those girls. How long does he expect to last?"

"Till tonight, I hope," Fiala said, lifting his glass, and a burst of laughter came from a table in a far-corner. A chair tipped back and Don Pedro went with it. Drunk, he arose, spotted Fiala and came toward him.

"Ah, Victor, you're back. Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Not yet. That girl's elusive."

"Too bad I can't help you." Don Pedro wiped his bald head and smiled at the detective, his pale eyes glazed and lost behind thick glasses. A little man, an old man and foolishly drunk, always drunk and unable to forget the past and his few brief triumphs in the bullring. Drinking brought back the false glory and dimmed his failure.

Drink was killing him, too, but he refused to die. Laughing now, he grabbed Fiala's arm and said, "Victor, I've an idea. Let's see that photograph again. We'll show it to the boys. One of them should know the girl."

Hesitating, Fiala gave it to the old man. Stumbling, Don Pedro returned to his table and presented the photograph to a trio as ancient and pickled as himself. No, they didn't know the girl, but they would be

happy to make her acquaintance and accomodate her. Round the table the photograph went, eliciting ribald remarks and laughter till Don Pedro whipped it away and took it to another table.

Ditto there: a battery of obscene observations and loud laughter. And ditto for all the tables. Then back came Don Pedro to the bar, solemnly shaking his head.

"The anonymous bitch," he intoned, "but I don't understand. Gomez didn't know her?" The bald sweating head gleamed as it swiveled left and right, then the old man leaned forward, cupping his hand to Fiala's ear. "Gomez is a liar," he hoarsely whispered.

"Why say that?" Fiala asked.

"Why? Because he wants the girl for himself. What other reason would he have?"

"Yes, what other reason?" Fiala shrugged, then turned to Pancho.

"Another drink while you're waiting for Fernandez?" the stout one said.

"Another."

There were more, many more small bottles of the pale gold brew—and no Fernandez. Was he tanking up at another bar, or taking care of one of the girls, rending his unique professional care? Fiala wondered, and Pancho leaned across the bar. "It doesn't look like your lucky night, Victor," he said.

"No, but I'll wait."

"What about something stronger to pass the time? A little mescal?"

"A little to pass the time."

Small glasses and small chasers of Carta Blanca and the little, with the passage of time, became a deluge. Mescal and malt, a deadly ambrosial mixture. If one indulged too much, the tumbling pebbles became an avalanche, and the brain, released of formalities, tended to riotous thought.

The bar-room was beginning to turn in a slow lugubrious imitation of a strange merry-go-round, bottles flashed in continuous circular dance of vibrating colors, voices and laughter shattered against the walls—and in all this hallucinatory circus there was only one immobile figure, the bull-chested Pancho, dim in the hazy light, his perpetual ghost-smile of contentment frozen on his face.

Silently and without warning the bar-room carousel ceased its slow gyrations and Fiala, warned, caught himself. He'd reached the limit. One more mescal and he'd be over the invisible line. But why not? Fernandez was lost, the girl in the photograph a phantom. Forget her. Forget . . .

"One more, Victor?" Pancho said and his pale blurred face emerged from the misty light. The proprietor was offering his product, but there was doubt in his voice; he didn't want to offend his patron. Fiala shook his head, and the side-door burst open. In stepped the very late Fernandez, his eyes half-closed.

Invitations to tables and greetings he ignored, if he heard them at all. He came to the bar, bumping Fiala. "Ah, my old friend," he cried and, embracing him, turned to Pancho. "A re-fill for Victor, and tequila for me," he said.

With a glance at Fiala, Pancho obliged and said, "We thought you weren't coming."

"What I thought," Fernandez answered, poking Fiala in the ribs and squinting at him. "A little duty to perform. That comes first, no?"

"Always."

"The girls must be taken care of."

"Of course."

"Ah, you agree, but only in principle. You don't indulge," Fernandez grinned.

"Not with the girls you handle."

"Victor, the old Puritan. Sometimes you remind me of the damned tourists from the States, the meek ones."

Here it comes, thought Fiala. Fernandez' obsession was about to break loose again. "You lived in Texas too long," the doctor went on.

"Let's not go into that again."

"Yes, forget. You want to forget all about it, but Texas was our land, all of it, and the gringos took it. Look at this, Victor."

Fiala knew what was coming, the invevitable map, antique and obsolete, of the original far-flung territories stamped by the Conquistadores, the vanished empire north of the Rio Grande. The map came forth, worn and tattered. "There," Fernandez said, "our land—and taken from us."

As we took it from the Indians, Fiala wanted to say, but that wouldn't stop Fernandez; he'd dodged that one before as nimbly as he dodged the reality of history. Fiala reached for his pocket and out came the photograph. "If I may interrupt," he said, "this is very important, Doctor."

More important than the lost territory of the conquerors, more than the past and the painful defeat which Fernandez wouldn't acknowledge? The map trembled in his hand like a tattered pennant, the lost territory a dusty myth now, yet the possibility of resurrection existed, the Conquerors would ride again.

Fernandez opened his mouth

to proclaim again his mad impossible dream and the girl in the photograph came into focus: his nemesis, his other madness addressed with her erotic pose.

Here was a confrontation of opposites: dead men in armor, and a naked girl offering herself. The battle was over before it began. The armored ones melted back into history. Fernandez plucked the photograph from Fiala's hand and squinted at it.

"Know her?" Fiala asked.

"A new 'client', Victor. She was due at my office tonight and never showed up." Fernandez raised his eyes. "Now I know why. You're looking for her."

"Perhaps you know where I can find her or, at least, her name."

"Carmen Rodriquez. She works in the District."

"She left there in a hurry today."

Fernandez handed back the photograph and shrugged. He regretted that he couldn't help, but Antonio Gomez might.

"I've already asked Gomez," Fiala explained, and Fernandez shrugged again, then lifted his glass from the bar, downed the drink in a gulp to prepare for a new verbal assault on the lost territories and found he was talking to himself, for Pancho had moved off to serve another customer and Fiala had fled through the side door.

Outside, the sky was black, the street silent. Not even a whisper escaped the thick walls of the Black Cat. Listening, Fiala shook his head, then saw the bulky shadow of his car and started toward it with a feeling of being afloat, for the mescal was in his legs and his brain. *Go home. Go home,* he told himself and, climbing behind the wheel of his car, he drove off.

VI

THE HOUSE was quiet, his daughter and grandchildren asleep when Fiala opened the door. Don't disturb them. Sleep in the patio, he told himself. It was a difficult route to the chair waiting in the dark, but he made it, settled like a foundering ship and closed his eyes but couldn't sleep.

With too much mescal in him he couldn't think straight and round and round went his thoughts. Forget the girl in the photograph, he told himself. Forget Luis. Forget Gomez. He'd pick up a new lead tomorrow, but where? How? Three dead trailer-drivers, seven hijackers and a trailer-load of papaya.

Beyond the avacado tree under which he sat, the huge

fronds of the banana stirred in the dark, and at the kitchen-door a dim white figure appeared. A ghost, or Aurora? he wondered, then closed his eyes, and his daughter, turning from the doorway, went back to bed.

"Out late and up early," Aurora said in the kitchen the next morning. "Do you want coffee?"

He nodded and as his daughter poured she scolded: "Too many visits to the Black Cat, Papi."

"It was strictly business last night," he answered.

"And this morning?"

"More business." He gulped his coffee and looked up. Should he ask her advice? But what could she tell him, and why was he thinking like this—like a child needing guidance. A child? No, an old man with aching bones and a brain that no longer functioned.

"More coffee?" Aurora asked.

It was better than the weak stuff served in the Blue Moon, but he shook his head and stood up. An old man? Let them prove it.

"You'll be home early tonight?" Aurora asked as he started for the door.

"I'll try," he flung back, "but don't count on it."

Arriving at headquarters, he noted the jeeps, motorcycles and policemen in groups out front. The scene wasn't unusual, but the presence of civilians with cameras slung from their shoulders belied this. The news-men were waiting like buzzards in the shadow of the arcade—and in his office, Meza was smoking a cigarette, his feet on the desk.

"What happened?" Fiala asked him.

"Not much, The trailer's been found. The hi-jackers left it in the dumps. A scavenger found it there."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing."

"Thanks. See you later."

"Going to the dumps?" Meza grinned.

"For a look."

"At what? A skeleton picked clean? The scavengers rise early and work fast. They did a good job."

"The requirements of their profession," Fiala shrugged. "I'll have a look at the skeleton."

Smoke from smoldering fires drifted over the dumps north of the city, a devestated area where buzzards planed overhead. The stink was terrible in the morning heat, the road sinuous, and Fiala drove carefully.

Up ahead he could see the abandoned trailer, and beyond the trailer a half-dozen shacks where the scavengers lived.

Braking his car beside the trailer, he stepped out and two alarmed buzzards took off from the remains. Human scavengers had done their work well, ravaging and picking the trailer as clean as a bone.

Fiala circled it and turned to the shacks. The scavengers faced him, waiting, while their children ran and hid. Questioning the men would be futile, he knew, and he started to turn away when a strange sight caught his eye—a tiny, mound-shaped church. Constructed of metal sheets, a crude wooden cross stood over it, and a goat and two kids lay in its shade.

If God is here in this stinking dump, then He must be everywhere, Fiala thought, and, approaching the entrance to the tiny church, he peered inside. On a small altar, candles were burning around a crucifix.

Bowing his head, Fiala stepped back and there, beside the door, the Virgin of Guadelupe stood in a shrine made of fragmented rocks; fresh flowers bedecked her feet and a candle flamed palely in a tin-can holder. Taking out his wallet, he placed a ten-peso note before the shrine.

Curious, the goats watched him; mute, the scavengers waited till he turned, then one stepped forward, a grizzled and gaunt old man. Removing his battered straw sombrero, he bowed and gave thanks for the gift to the Virgin.

"A beautiful church. I didn't expect to find one here," Fiala said.

"Thank you, senor." The old man hesitated. "You were looking for something perhaps?"

Wheels, tires, steering-geer, motor? All movable parts of the trailer were well-hidden beneath piles of stinking refuse. Fiala smiled and shook his head. "The trailer is yours," he said and, bowing, started to turn away when the old man stopped him.

"One moment," he said. "Juan!" A withered hand brought a younger man forward who reached inside his blouse. "Perhaps you were looking for this?" he said.

Garbage, smoke, buzzards and the reeking stink were left behind. Racing out of the dumps and back to headquarters, Fiala found the jeeps, motorcycles and police still there, with more news-men an air of excitement that trembled in the hot air. As he entered the Captain's office, Meza looked up, his feet still on the desk and a cigarette dangling from his lips. Removing the cigarette, he yawned, then grinned and said, "The same question again, Victor?"

"Yes. What's happened?"

"Your girl-friend in the photograph is in the morgue. You're not surprised? You think your mythical hi-jacker did the job on her, I take it. And you believe she was connected with the gang."

"I had my doubts last night. I have none now."

"You're wrong, of course, but let us suppose you're not. The girl is dead, so how will you pin down this Luis whom you suspect is leader of the gang?"

"My apologies, but I haven't figured that one out yet."

"Or anything else with your peculiar methods."

"Your methods are better?"

"I managed to find the girl you were looking for, and I accomplished it without sweating."

"A phone call from the real finder, most likely."

Meza laughed, but now he removed his feet from the desk and conceded a point: "You were right about the killer."

"If you'll make that plainer, Captain."

"Of course. But it was probably a lucky guess on your part."

"Bring it out, or forget it," Fiala growled impatiently.

"Suppose you tell me what happened to the girl, Victor," Meza said, still disposed to needle the older man. "Ah, you're silent now. You don't know. Did you forget your own wild guess? Perhaps you'd like to look in the morgue. No?" The Captain shrugged. "It's not a pretty sight. You see, the murderer cut off the girl's breasts. What? You're not surprised?"

"I knew that already, Captain."

"Without seeing the dead girl? Come off it."

Fiala shrugged, reached into his pocket and held up the "gift" the scavengers had given him at the dump—a mutilated photograph of the murdered girl with two holes cut from it where her breasts had been.

"Where the devil did you get that?" the astounded Captain said.

"Ask the Virgin of Guadelupe in the dumps, or better, ask the scavengers where you left them this morning. And now look at this." Fiala turned the photograph. In back of it was the same message as on the first photograph he'd found, and below it, was another message, the product of a heavy hand —PAYMENT DELIVERED, SENORITA. Meza read the words aloud and raised his eyes to Fiala's.

VII

A HALF-HOUR later on the highway leading south to Flores, Fiala turned off the smooth concrete into a dirt road. Ahead

of him stretched a parched and rolling landscape of scrub and cacti. Suddenly the road dipped and a dozen primitive adobe houses with thatched roofs appeared before him.

As he stopped the car, a few goats looked up and a scrawny black hound rose from the dust, barked once and slunk off. Silence followed, a long silence, and finally an old man appeared in a doorway. It was the peon who'd witnessed the hi-jacking of the trailer. Fiala opened the car-door, climbed out and the two men greeted each other.

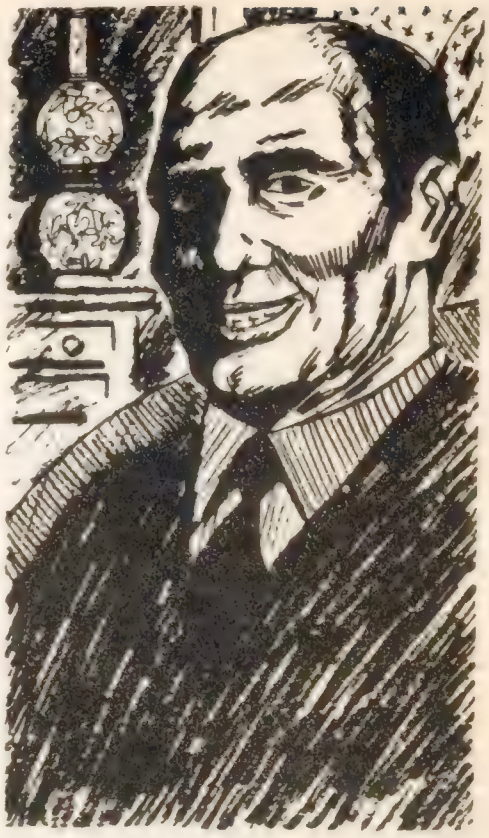
"Your indulgence again, senor," Fiala said. "The truck that was stolen, you're certain it turned about and went south?"

"Yes, senor."

"How many men were aboard?"

The old man hesitated, then lifted his leathery hands, finger-counted and said, "Seven, senor."

Fiala smiled, thanked him, gave him some money and drove back to the highway. Flores lay seventy-fives miles to the south. The hi-jackers wouldn't take the trailer that far to get rid of its cargo and at no point between Flores and Montes was there a town big enough for the thieves to dispose of the papayas. This meant



the final destination of the stolen fruit was Montes. Someone there had bought the load, yet the trailer had gone south, or did the peon lie?

Lighting a cigarette, Fiala turned the radio on, snapped it off and stared ahead at the empty road. His mind was just as empty and he couldn't think. The trailer had gone south, but ended up in a grave-yard dump north of Montes. What did that indicate?

Nothing. The white road blurred, dust swirled across it

and settled down. Ahead, two buzzards were shredding the carcass of a dead animal. He slowed the car and heard an ominous knocking under the hood. This was no place to run into trouble and he thought of turning back, but he was too far from Montes to risk it. Besides, in five minutes he'd be at Las Palmas, a tiny village where a good mechanic from Montes had set up shop.

Las Palmas was dead, stricken in the heat. There were only a few houses, a church and a tiny forlorn plaza. Voices came from a cantina, otherwise there was no sign of life. On a street off the highway, Fiala braked his car in front of a delapidated shack—the mechanic's shop. A short muscular man stepped from it and squinted in the sun.

"Victor, what brings you here?" he cried.

"A sick car, Nicho. Will you have a look at it?"

Fiala stepped out, and Nicho slipped behind the wheel, gunned the motor, listened, frowned and turned off the key. "Are you in a hurry?" he asked.

"A big hurry."

"Too bad. It'll take an hour, at least, to fix the sickness."

"That's the best you can do?"

"The best, Victor."

Their eyes met. Old friends they were, he and Nicho, and Nicho had always been the odd one. He'd had a good thing going in Montes, but suddenly he'd up and left it for this crumb in the desert.

"How are you making out?" Fiala asked him.

"I'm getting by."

"You'll never get rich here."

"Is that important?"

"No, but you had it made in Montes."

"You know why I left. It's peaceful here, with nobody running up my back and no troubles."

No troubles? Nicho's eyes betrayed him. Something's bothering him, Fiala thought, and looked around. There was no sign of any one, and not a sound. A sleepy, peaceful village, but a man from the city could rot or go mad here. "It's a little too quiet for me," Fiala remarked, turning back to Nicho and meeting his troubled eyes again.

"Every man to his own, Victor," Nicho answered and pointed across the dismal plaza toward the cantina. "You can have a drink or two over there while I work on the car."

"A good idea. I'll see you later, Nicho."

The thick walls of the cantina kept out the heat of the sun. A shrunken old man stood behind the bar, while four young fellows in their late

teens sat at a table, drinking and playing cards. Fiala asked for beer, Carta Blanca, light, golden and cold, deluding himself, for in this fly-specked hole-in-the-wall there was no iced bottle and nothing but warm Indio, much too warm for his taste.

But it was better than nothing and, after an exchange with the barman, he glanced at the card-players. Something seemed wrong. From the moment of entering, he'd had an odd feeling about the quartet at the table, and the old fellow behind the bar looked frightened.

"Another, senor?" the barman said.

The beer was much to warm, but Fiala nodded. It was an excuse to stay and, once more, he glanced at the young fellows. They were dressed in rough clothes, sandals and large-brimmed sombreros. Country boys? he wondered and looked at the bar-man. The old fellow's eyes were fixed on the card players. Why? What was wrong? Emptying the bottle, Fiala stepped outside.

A peaceful village in the backwaters of nowhere. What trouble could be here? he wondered, and rounding the forlorn plaza, a sharp familiar sound caught his ear. Pausing, he looked into a dingy little adobe and saw a single pool-table, two men and a mound of huge papayas.

One of the pool-players looked up and nodded. "A batch of beauties," Fiala said, pointing to the papayas.

Without a word, the man put aside his cue-stick, picked up one of the melons and handed it to Fiala. "A gift for you, senor."

"It's too big," Fiala protested, but the man shrugged, drew a knife and the cut the melon in half. "Less than half isn't worth accepting," he said and turned to pick up his cue-stick.

Fiala left the cantina, and returned to the garage.

"How are you making out?" he said. Not hearing Fiala approach, Nicho whirled about and saw him holding the halved melon. "Beautiful, no?" Fiala said.

Nicho barely nodded. "Another twenty minutes and I'll be finished with your car, Victor."

"Good. I'll leave this in your shop while I stretch my legs." With that, Fiala walked off, following the narrow dirt road that had brought him from the highway. Fifty yards away he came to a small grove of sour orange trees heavy with fruit that glistened in the sun. In the midst of this oasis lay a huge mound of papayas. An old man smoking a cigarette squatted beside it. Fiala greeted him,

passed a few words and returned to the mechanic's shop.

"Back so soon?" Nicho said, looking up.

"It's too hot to walk."

"Your car's not ready yet."

"I know." Fiala squatted on a box and lit up. "Yes, it's very peaceful here," he remarked. "A good place to rest."

Silence from Nicho.

"You don't miss Montes?" he asked.

"No, Victor."

"Well, I suppose it's the peace that you want, but there's little else here—except papaya."

Nicho stiffened and turned. "Big papayas," Fiala continued, not looking up, but sketching with his finger in the dust at his feet. "All those melons in the poolroom, and more up the road. Do they grow them here, Nicho?"

"We have a few trees."

"That bear paltry fruit. Those big melons come from the south. The people here must like them." His finger still tracing in the dust, Fiala went on: "A very healthy fruit, but too much of anything is no good. Even too much peace and quiet, right, Nicho?"

Fiala looked up and their eyes met. There was silence again and the hot sun—faintly, at a distance, the click of billiard balls sounded. "There are too many strangers in Las Palmas, hey, Nicho?" said Fiala.

Nicho swallowed, sweat dripped from his face. There was no need for Fiala to tell him why he was here. "Those young fellows are loaded with money. How could they earn it, Nicho?"

When Nicho didn't answer, Fiala looked down at his feet. In the dust, he'd traced a truck and trailer. Nicho stared at it and Fiala saw his unease. "A trailer must have brought all those papayas here," he said.

Nicho didn't reply. He was still staring at the sketch in the dust. "The trailer was stolen," Fiala went on. "You didn't know that, did you?"

"How would I?"

"Then it was here?"

"I don't know. I mind my own business."

"A stolen trailer. The third one, Nicho. Do you know what happened to the drivers? They were murdered."

Nicho shrugged. "There are no newspapers in Las Palmas," he said. "None of us here knows what goes on elsewhere."

"Well, now you know. Three trailers, and three dead drivers. It's my belief that all three trailers were unloaded here."

"They were," Nicho admitted at last.

"There are at least seven men in the gang. What about

the four young fellows in the cantina, Nicho?"

"They came with the last trailer."

"And where are the others?"

"Gone, but they'll be back for the papayas."

"They took some already?"

"On a smaller truck."

"Which way did they go?"

"North—to Montes, I suppose."

"Who's the boss of the operation?"

"A tall fellow, very fair and with green eyes. A swaggerer. His name is Luis and he acts kind of crazy compared to the others, but they're no prizes either. They do nothing but drink and play cards. No one goes in the cantina while they're there."

"A good idea too." Fiala stood up and, with a swipe of his foot, destroyed the sketch of the truck and trailer."

VIII

AFTER THE HOT dusty drive back to Montes, Fiala stopped at the Blue Moon for coffee and noticed the restaurant owner's Cadillac standing at the curb like a huge new toy. A nice play-thing for a fellow who once shined shoes in the plaza, he thought, and entered the restaurant.

Washing up in the mens' room, he came out and found his coffee waiting for him at his special table. Now the waitress approached with a plate of sweet-cakes. Her sharp eyes flicked over him, noting the white dust on his suit.

"A long trip, senor?" she said.

"Long enough, but why the sweet-cakes?"

"I can see it in your eyes. Everything went well today, no?"

"Well enough." Fiala laughed.

"You see, I always know. By the way, Captain Meza was looking for you."

"Let him look. I'm busy."

"A little rooster with a gun and badge. Let him have salt for his coffee," the waitress said and moved off to another table while Fiala lifted his cup.

Otero was coming toward him, smiling. "Victor!" he said and took a chair. "How are things going, my friend?"

"So-so. And with you?"

"Can I complain? The money keeps rolling in."

"Good. You're really climbing the ladder."

Otero smiled. "And from the bottom rung. I used to shine your shoes in the plaza. Remember?"

"That was a long time ago, Otero."

"The years go fast, Victor. You had no grey hairs, and no little pot-belly." Otero shook his

head. "It must be hard for you now."

"Let's say it's no longer easy."

"Especially when you're trying to crack a tough one like the trailer hi-jackers."

"You know about that?"

"Who else would Lopez put on them? Any luck?"

"It's not a matter of luck. You figure things out, or you don't. So I've drawn nothing but blanks."

"Too bad," Otero said. He stood up, excused himself and left.

Sipping his coffee, Fiala watched him to the door. The boy who'd once shined his shoes hadn't forgotten the past, but he'd lost something. The newly rich become arrogant, thought Fiala, rising and leaving his coffee unfinished and the sweet-cakes untouched.

Outside, he got into his car and drove to the District and found the woman he'd spoken to the previous day. Standing in her doorway, she smiled at him and said, "Back again, senor?"

"A little unfinished business concerning your 'friend' Carmen who was murdered."

"Hmph, she didn't last very long, did she?"

"Nor the tourist she entertained yesterday. He was struck on the head too hard, and Gomez claims he had nothing to do with it."

"That's true. Another man did the job."

"Do you know him?"

The woman hesitated, then shook her head and said, "Who would want to? He's crazy. He was smoking the weed and wanted to burn me with the cigarette, so I threw him out."

"Do you know his name?"

"I heard Gomez call him Luis."

"What does he look like?"

The woman hesitated again, then began to describe her unwanted customer. "Very tall, green eyes . . . "

It was enough for Fiala. He drove back the way he'd come and stopped at the Hotel de los Reyes. Carriages lined the curb, the skinny nags and drivers dozing while Carlos Rios, the taxi-driver, bulging fat and dripping sweat, snored at the wheel of his car. A tap on the shoulder brought him awake.

"Ah, Victor," he greated Fiala. "Hot enough?"

"Hot enough. Have you seen Gomez?"

"You're still looking for him? I told him yesterday you wanted to see him."

"What time was that?" Fiala said, coming alert.

"A few minutes after you asked for him."

"If I'm not mistaken, you told

me he'd gone to the District with a tourist."

"That's right. He started for there and came back because the tourist forgot something in his room."

"I see, and where's Gomez now?"

Rios pointed to a cantina on the opposite corner. "He could be in Ricardo's That's his hang-out when there's no action."

"Thanks." Fiala crossed the street and entered the cantina. Alone at a table, Gomez frowned as the detective approached him.

"Relaxing?" Fiala said, taking a chair.

"My favorite sport."

"After 'steering' tourists to the wrong places, of course."

Gomez shrugged. "I only give them what they ask for and, if some have peculiar tastes, who am I to advise them otherwise?"

"I know, you're not a priest. But I'm afraid you're in trouble. The tourist you took to the District yesterday died this morning."

"That was my fault?"

"You managed the thing."

"You're wrong. I had nothing to do with it. I never entered the house. The girl . . . "

"Is also dead. You didn't know that?"

"All I know is that you're trying to put something on me, but you can't."

"You set the tourist up, Gomez. He had a wad of money on him and you couldn't resist it."

"No, I brought him to the girl and went to the bar where you found me. The girl and someone else must have taken the tourist."

"Someone else whom you don't know?" Fiala shook his head. "He was your partner, Gomez. Let me tell you what happened. You started for the District with the tourist and came back to the hotel. While you were waiting for the tourist, Carlos Rios told you I

was looking for you. That put you on the spot, so you picked up a friend to do the job that you intended to do. Your friend hit the tourist too hard. You had nothing to do with that. You were in the bar at the time but, later, you met your friend to split the tourist's money. You also warned him about the girl."

"Warned him?"

"You told him I was looking for her."

"No, senor."

What was the use? Gomez would deny everything till Hell froze over—except that Hell never did and, certainly, it wouldn't today, especially in the lockup at headquarters, which was small enough to make a mouse uncomfortable. Fiala shrugged and stood up with a sigh.

"Too bad. I thought you could help," he said. He went to the door, pushed it open a few inches, released it and retraced his steps to lean over the table where Gomez sat. "Too bad you can't co-operate. Better come along," he said, "and no guff. I'm not in the mood."

"Where are we going, Victor?"

"To the hot-box. You'll have more privacy there, and perhaps you'll remember certain things you forgot." Fiala's tone was grim.

IX

"NO CIGARETTES for Gomez, no water, nothing," Fiala said to Captain Meza at headquarters.

"What's the charge against him?" the Captain asked.

"Lying."

"But you can't hold him for that."

"The wooden bars will. Meantime, I'm off to the Black Cat for a few cool ones. Take care of the prisoner, Captain."

Fiala walked to the door, and Meza stopped him.

"If you don't mind, what did Gomez do?" he asked.

Enlighten the inquisitive little rooster, or let him dangle? Fiala yawned and said, "I'm tried. I'll explain later, my friend."

Two hours passed before he returned. Gomez was sweating blood in the "hot-box", but was he ready to talk? Not unless he's properly squeezed, thought Fiala, and, turning to Meza, he asked him to release the prisoner.

The Captain complied, and Fiala beckoned to Gomez, then led him to the morgue. A sheeted body lay on a table. Fiala drew back the sheet and exposed the murdered girl. "Know her, Gomez?" he said.

"Carmen Rodriquez." Gomez went pale.

"You killed her. Why?"

"Me?" Gomez began to shake visibly.

A few minutes later Fiala led him back to the cell.

"What's going on?" Meza asked.

"Nothing now. It's all over, Captain."

"If you'll be so kind as to explain. . ."

"After I speak to the Chief. Here." Fiala handed him a list of names. "The first four you'll find in the cantina in Las Palmas. Bring them in. The fifth and sixth are waiters in the Blue Moon. You can pick them up on the way back from Las Palmas."

"Pedro and Luis Otero," Meza said, finishing the list. Do you want them arrested too?"

"Father and son, both. That's why they're on the list."

"And the charges?"

"Later, Captain. The Chief is impatient."

Within three hours, the round-up was completed, and the Chief was in an expansive mood.

"My apologies for roughing you up, Victor," Lopez said when Fiala entered his office.

"That's water under the bridge," Fiala shrugged.

"You're right. A cigar?" Lopez pushed the box across the desk, extended his lighter, held it in readiness, then flicked it.

Fiala took the light and sat back. "A good smoke," he remarked.

VICTOR FIALA

"And a good job on your part. How did you manage it?"

"It was like looking for a needle in a haystack," Fiala answered. "I sweated blood and, more, I made on real bad mistake."

"What was that, Victor?"

"I thought there were seven in the gang, but there were

eight. The eighth man was the real leader, but he didn't take part in the hi-jackings and I had no reason to suspect him."

"Then, Luis Otero . . ." the Chief asked.

"His father gave the orders and planned the hijackings. Luis led the others, and he was the one who slipped when he left the photograph of the girl behind at the last hi-jacking. That became the key to the whole business."

"Then you suspected Luis when you found the photograph?"

Fiala shook his head. "Not at all. In fact, there were no suspects I could name, but the search for the girl led me to Vargas, the 'guide' and he warned Luis that I was looking for the girl. Obviously Luis had it in for her in the first place, but now he was afraid she'd talk so he murdered her. I was sure of that, but I couldn't prove it."

"Then how did you nail him?"

"I took the easy way, though Vargas might disagree. I had to squeeze him to loosen his tongue, so I accused him of murdering the girl. He cracked and put the finger on Luis, then named all the gang-members, including the brain of the outfit—Luis' father."

"From shoe-shine boy to wealthy restaurant owner. Pedro Otero had it made," Lopez said, shaking his head. "Why did he have to do what he did?"

"Because he was greedy," Fiala answered bluntly.

"And Luis—why did he mutilate the girl?"

"Too much marijuana, an insane whim, or, speaking of greed again, perhaps he didn't like Carmen asking a hundred pesos for her favors."

Next Month:

Another TRUE CRIME STORY Masterpiece

VINCENT TERESA: BUM ON THE RUN

Vincent Teresa was born to underworld royalty and had an all but infallible instinct for turning a dishonest buck. He had also, alas, a royal instinct for spending—and when his debts got him in too deep, he turned informer on the Mafia itself, which never forgets.

by DAVID MAZROFF

DEATH IN HIS HEART

Bellman's arson plot did not include incineration of the woman he loved. But it didn't quite work according to Hoyle.

by

HERBERT HARRIS

EVERY TIME he looked at Marjorie now a kind of nausea rose up inside him—a sickness of hate and angry frustration.

She was forever complaining in her whinning voice. Things that went wrong were always *his* fault, never hers.

"You don't believe I have these headaches, do you? You think I just put them on to win your sympathy?"

"I don't believe anything any more," Bellman said sourly. "You're always acting the martyr, telling lies. If you're ill, why not see a doctor?"

"A doctor can't help me—it's my mental state."

She spoke with a soulless calm, never flying off the handle. That was the hell of it, her dignified martyrdom.

The nausea was welling up in his guts. "You make me sick!" he shouted at her. *"Sick!* Do you hear?"

Bellman crashed the door so hard as he went out that it was a wonder the glass remained

intact. One day, he thought, the glass would really reach breaking-point. . .like his patience.

He drove like a madman through the dense traffic, snarling at slower drivers. At the office he was so bad-tempered with his secretary that she started crying, making him feel like a heel.

It can't go on, he told himself bitterly, it can't go on. . .

If it weren't for Jennifer he would go completely round the bend. The balm of Jennifer's sweet smile, her soothing voice, her self-effacing manner, the way she could stroke away the awful tightness in his forehead with her cool fingers. . .

Jennifer was his wife's sister, but the two women had quarrelled and become estranged. It was amazing how two girls could be created by the same parents, yet be so different. Jennifer had all the virtues Marjorie lacked, and Bellman was now deeply and passionately in love with her.

They often met at lunchtime. He would drive her to a place outside the town, where they could have a drink and some lunch together. Then they would sit in the car in the most secluded spot he could find and whisper of their future as they kissed.

He felt sure Marjorie would find out eventually, because secret love-affairs never remained secret for long in a town like Broxford.

She got to know of it, in fact, sooner than he had expected.

"I know now," Marjorie announced in her flat, self-pitying voice, "why Jennifer wanted to leave Mother's place and get her own flat."

"Oh?"—he was at once on his guard. He had always avoided talking about Jennifer in case his love should show in his face.

"It was to have somewhere where she could carry on her sordid little affair with another woman's husband."

"Oh?" He saw the look in her pale, cold eyes. "Look," he said, "if you're trying to suggest. . ."

"Please, Norman!" She screwed up her eyes as if in pain. "Don't treat me like a child! Do you think I don't know?"

His jaws shut like a trap. "All right," he said bluntly, "I'm in love with your sister. She's got more human kindness in her little finger than you've got in your whole body. But I *haven't* been to her flat!"

"Hasn't she asked you? Oh, dear. . .perhaps she's beginning to find out the sort of man you really are."

Her smug sneering made him want to strike her.

"I know Jennifer," she went on, "and she isn't really your type, Norman. She'll never put up with your funny moods. When she gets to know you really well, she'll throw you aside like an old glove. Perhaps I should let her into a few secrets about you. . ."

"You're mad!" Bellman yelled at her, seething, *"Mad! Mad! Mad!"*

Once more a door slammed. He retreated to the room that had become his den. Slumping into a chair, he sat smoking cigaret after cigaret.

The desire to kill her had crept back into his mind. He had felt the desire quite strongly before, but never as savagely as this.

With this yearning to destroy came the outline of a plan he had thought about several times. The plan revolved around "Old Timbers," their weekend place.

Her weekend place actually. A timber house by the river which her father had left her. In happier days they had gone there often, he to fish and potter about the river in an outboard-motor dinghy.

If "Old Timbers" caught fire, it would burn like a matchbox. That's what an insurance-man had said, slapping a tidy premium on it. "All dry wood. You want to watch that dodgy old wiring in the cellar," he had added.

Earlier on, Marjorie had been going to do something about it. Then she had complained she was short of money. And when they had completely lost their love for each other, she had not bothered any more about the weekend retreat.

Bellman thought a lot about that cellar, about the tatty electric wiring on the dry wood beams. Her father had left some inflammable junk down there, too—old horsehair sofa and chairs, matchwood tea-chests full of paper and wood shavings. . .

All he had to do was to get Marjorie down to the cottage and burn it down with her in it. His biggest ally would be those sleeping-tablets she took.

She took tablets regularly—insomnia being a part of her neurotic condition—and she went to sleep at once. She slept the sleep of the dead. He had had a job once trying to wake her up.

"Old Timbers" would go up in minutes, like brushwood, and he could fix the fire to star about midnight. She was always in bed by eleven. He had read an article once by an insurance-man who had said the "candle-method" was almost undetectable as a fire-cause.

You got a big candle that

burned for some hours, and fixed it with its base standing in a flat container of paraffin. When the flame burned down to the paraffin, it all went up in flames and quickly ignited anything arranged above it. . .like old stuffed chairs, for instance, and cartons of wood shavings.

LIKE A home-made time-bomb! If it worked—and why shouldn't it?—Marjorie would be no more. And his hate for her was such that the thought of her destruction left him utterly feelingless.

But the build-up to the actual deed must be subtle, carefully planned and handled.

Bellman had done a bit of amateur acting. He could manage to look contrite when he wanted to.

"Marjorie, I've been thinking. Our relations have just about reached their lowest ebb recently, and—"

"If you're asking for a divorce," she broke in, "you can forget it. I've told you before. I'll see you in hell first."

Oh, no, he thought, *you'll be in hell before I am.*

"I was thinking we might try a reconciliation," he said.

"You'd have to change a lot," she told him brutally.

"We could both improve our tempers," he answered mildly. "In your own case, Marjorie, you're stuck in this house too much. You never suggest running down to 'Old Timbers' like you used to."

"There's no point in going there," she said. "You always disliked the place and never wanted to go."

"I've had a change of heart," Bellman lied. "I think I'd like to go there again. . .for a weekend of complete rest."

"When?"

"Next weekend if you like."

"It's got to be got ready. I'd have to go in advance. . .air the place. . .air the mattresses. . . make up the beds. . ."

"Yes, of course! I realize that." The suggestion had come from *her*. . .splendid!

There was a silence. Her thin mouth twisted. "It's one way of getting rid of me for a night. Will you go out there with Jennifer?"

Bellman threw up his hands, trying to control his temper. "There you go, stirring up trouble, when I'm making peace moves," he said. "In any case, Jennifer is sick and taking things easy."

Marjorie sighed. "Oh, very well," she agreed resignedly, "I'll go down to the cottage on Thursday evening, and you can join me there on Friday when you've finished at the office. I'm willing to try, but it won't do the slightest bit of good!"

Oh, won't it! Bellman felt like laughing out loud.

It was arranged that Marjorie should go to the cottage early Thursday evening, arriving about six.

When Thursday came, Bellman could hardly control his excitement. In the boot of his car he had a large candle, a flat plastic candleholder, a plastic washing-up bowl and a can of paraffin. The candle, its holder and the bowl would all dissolve in the blaze. The can he would take away with him and dispose of.

In the cellar of "Old Timbers" he lit the candle about five-o'clock. He had established that it would burn for approximately seven hours before the flame came into contact with the paraffin. So the fire should get a grip just after midnight when the drugged Marjorie would be soundly asleep.

He made sure there was no draught to blow out the candle. Then he locked the door to the cellar and hid the key in an outside shed. In the event of his wife taking a fit into her head to go down into the cellar, she wouldn't be able to do so.

Bellman had always been thorough about details. He was doubly thorough now. He even drove back to town by a different route to avoid passing Marjorie on the way down.

Arriving back in town, he went straight to a residential club where he often had a late meal. He had several whiskies at the bar. They produced a warm glow inside him, and when he walked from the bar into the dining-room he had quite a good appetite.

Bellman had had a heavy day, and after the meal he sat in an armchair in the club lounge and dozed off. When he awoke it was eleven o'clock.

He pondered the idea of staying at the club, but decided finally to go home, because he would be available on the phone when he was rung—as he would surely be rung—and he would have his weekend case already packed for the journey to the riverside cottage. . .or what was left of it.

When Bellman reached home, he saw with surprise and alarm that there was a light on in the bedroom upstairs. He hurried into the house and up the stairs and flung open the bedroom door.

Marjorie was sitting up in bed reading. It was past eleven, the time she normally went off to sleep.

"I thought you'd never come," she said plaintively.

"Why aren't you at the cottage?" he demanded angrily.

"There's been a change of plan," she answered. "I did ring

your office but I couldn't get any answer."

He glared at her, the nausea of frustration mounting again.

She said: "I went to see Jennifer. You said she was sick, and as her sister I felt I should go and see how she was, in spite of our estrangement. You were right. Poor Jennifer was looking dreadfully run down."

"And so?"

"Well, I felt I ought to do something, Norman. I told her she should have a few days' rest somewhere quiet. She agreed. I drove her down to 'Old Timbers' and left her there, and said I was going to send you down to comfort her."

Bellman went deathly white. A sudden sickness inside him made him want to vomit.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" he moaned. He rushed out of the room, out of the house, and leapt into his car.

The house was blazing like a giant bonfire when he got there, and, sobbing and gulping, he rushed to the remnants of the front door.

A burly fireman yelled: "Keep away!"

Bellman shouted above the roar of the flames: "There was a woman up there!"

"A woman?"—The fireman was staring at him.

"Oh, my God!" Bellman muttered. He plunged through the doorway.

"Come back, you ruddy lunatic!" the fireman bellowed.

The staircase was alight, but Bellman staggered blindly up them. *"Jennifer!"* he screamed. *"Jennifer,* darling!"

Between himself and the door of the bedroom was a gaping hole, belching flames and smoke like the mouth of a volcano.

He took a great leap, and landed beyond the hole. But the floorboards, blackened and thin, gave beneath him, and Bellman plunged, screaming, into the inferno beneath.

"Of course, they haven't found your husband, Mrs. Bellman," said the station-sergeant on the phone, "and I'm afraid there's not much hope, because 'Old Timbers' is just a heap of black rubble."

"And my sister, Jennifer?"

"Well, she jumped, Ma'am, and landed behind a shed, and lay there unconscious. It was some while before they knew she was there. She's in hospital. Her injuries aren't too bad, I understand. They're not telling her yet about Mr. Bellman. She knew him quite well, I daresay?"

"No, not very well," Marjorie replied in her flat, unemotional voice. ●

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TERMINAL LIST

Once to every man it may come, the blind unreasoning urge to kill a lifetime foe. Could I succumb to it?

by ROBERT W. ALEXANDER

IT GREW ON ME the more I thought about it. At first it was a shaky decision. It's an awsome thing to plot an actual murder, but after I could pic-

ture it happening, it wasn't so bad. I actually *wanted* to kill John Buckley.

I bought a gun. Not too smart, maybe. It took five days before I was allowed to take it from the gun shop. And I began stalking John Paul Buckley. He is prominent in politics. It was simple to hide in the bushes by his garage and wait for him. It was sick and I knew it. Still, my heart raced when he drove in. I couldn't miss him! I aimed, but a sudden feeling: *this isn't what you want!* stopped me. I didn't shoot.

I allowed him to walk to safety. I felt a lot better. I was still going to kill him, but this wasn't the type of revenge I wanted. If I had shot him he'd never know who killed him. I needed a much better way to get him!

I was still thinking about a way on Friday when Gary Sobin climbed on the bar stool beside me. He's thirty-seven, ten years my junior. We sometimes met at the club for lunch.

"How'd you come out?" he asked.

"Okay," I said, lying to him.

Last week on the golf course I had collapsed on him. Gary and I are a close match in golf and other sports. We've been friends for ten years because of it. I usually manage to edge him out and he's been determined to beat me. Great competition.

"Glad to hear it," he said. He mumbled something about how I had a phenomenal accuracy for sports. True, I suppose, but of no importance right now. I was wondering how I could tell him: *Hey! Guess what? I'm insane!*

Gary is a promoter of some sort. Has a fancy home and a rich wife, belongs to the club, and seems to make out with his schemes for a quick buck. He tells me some, but not all. I'm a mediocre accountant. I never reached heights I think myself capable of because of a dishonorable discharge years ago. Thanks to a Major John Buckley when I was a naive lieutenant under him.

Even Linda, my unfortunate wife, never learned my secret. But she never questioned why I backed away from opportunities that would have advanced my career. But would also uncover my disgrace!

The waitress called Gary and me to the dining room and we carried our drinks with us. Since I have been a widower I see few friends. Especially after my lovely daughter, Sally, died. Sally liked Gary. He was like an uncle to her. I guess she was even infatuated with him, but of course, Gary was older and married. Gary's wife, Marge,

has quite a time with Gary. He chases women and he has the good looks to attract them.

While we were eating I asked, "Did you ever make a terminal list?"

"What kind of list?" he asked, puzzled.

I corrected myself. "I mean, you ever make a list of the people who have done you wrong?"

"You damn right. I've got a list, but I call it something else."

I smiled for him. Insanity is a strange disease. Causes paradox. I think I'm rational, but know I'm not! It wasn't only John Buckley I intended to kill. I looked at all the busy, happy people in the dining room. Laughing. Talking. I had the urge to get up and shout: *Every one of you is doomed! You're all going to die! How do you like that? So why are you sitting their chit-chatting nonsense?*

I discovered Gary was studying me. He asked, "You feeling okay?"

"Sure."

"You look a little wild-eyed?"

"Probably the pills I'm taking. Tell me about your list."

"What's to tell?" He suddenly grinned. "Okay. There's some people I'd like to get even with. When the opportunity comes, I'll stick the knife in and twist it."

"Would you plot to get even?"

"Plot? Well, yeah, why not. I got a conspiratorial mind. A marginal bit of hidden strength. And there is one guy who I'd really like to nail. Hey, what's with you? You got a chance to get even?"

"Yes."

He laughed. "You want my approval? You got it."

"To kill him?"

Gary tensed. "You got to be kidding?" I shook my head and a look of apprehension filled his face. "Hold on! You mean murder?"

"I guess that's what it's called." I answered. For some reason I didn't expect Gary to be overly shocked. But he was looking for me to give him reason to laugh. I soberly met his eyes.

He exhaled the breath he was holding. "You aren't kidding! Com'on, Scott! No way! What's got in to you? The risk isn't worth it. I'm in favor of tit for tat, but murder—Nobody killed you!"

"Might as well have."

Gary let a low whistle escape. "Man! You are in a mood. You think of the consequences? You're no Houdini. They'd catch you sure as hell. What's happened to Scott Brandon, the solid citizen? The Jock of Ribalter has flipped."

I had bewildered him, all

right. I said, "Say it's hypothetical."

"Well, hell—that's different!"

"Always is. But it just so happens I can kill or murder, as you call it. I think there's a difference. Murder implies a senseless killing. Whereas, the connotation of a killing is more or less a just execution."

"You sure you know what you're saying? Your face is flushed."

"Probably is. Listen, Gary, at one time or another the greatest grief in my life has been caused by evil people. I can kill all three of them and get away with it."

"Three?" Gary winced. "My God, Scott! Get away with it? With murder?"

I shrugged. "Yes, wouldn't you be tempted?"

"Tempted, perhaps. But, no way. Not murder."

"Then you wouldn't do it?"

Gary decided I wasn't serious. "No, not if I were you. You got a lot going for you. You're tall, still got your hair and a flat belly. You're in good shape. Scott, you could start a new life if you'll ever accept the fact that Linda is dead."

My wife was killed eight years ago in an auto wreck, by a speeding drunk. She was murdered by a speeding alcoholic with a record of drunk driving.

I told Gary, "No one will ever replace Linda!"

"I know," he sighed.

I asked, "What would you say if I killed them?"

"Com'on, Scott!" Gary frowned. "I'd say you were crazy."

"That's what I thought." I paid for lunch, not sure it was my turn. But I wouldn't want to always owe him a lunch. Funny, everything is so trite. Gary walked away believing I wouldn't kill anyone.

Of the three on my list, Steve Kenyon deserved to be first. My daughter, Sally, had died at one of his infamous penthouse parties. Everything I could read about Steve Kenyon spelled syndicated crime. He had been charged numerous times for crimes, faced trial twice, but never had been convicted.

Sally had been attending a college in San Diego. I saw her the day before her death and she told me about the rich young man she had met. She had a date to attend a party at the beach-front hotel he owned.

Sally never took drugs. I know she didn't. But she leaped to her death while high on LSD.

"Thought she could fly," Steve Kenyon testified at the inquest. He disclaimed knowledge of how she got the drug. It was ruled she brought it

with her. I knew better! Somebody slipped it to her, and it was Steve Kenyon!

My greatest fear is to be caught before I kill all three men. I can't kill Steve Kenyon first. The police will suspect me. I had assaulted him with my fists at the inquest. My bitter hate was known. John Paul Buckley had to be number one! Only he knew that I hated him.

It was lucky I hadn't shot him with my newly-purchased gun. The police might have traced the bullet to me. Yes, I needed some way of killing without pulling a gun's trigger. But what?

The unique method occurred to me. I'd need practice, but I knew a friend with a cabin. Jim Benton was at his office when I drove there.

"Scott, boy," he greeted me. "What's cooking?"

"The offer to loan me your cabin still open?"

"Sure. When you want it?"

"Now, for a couple of weeks."

"Two weeks? Say, you must have met a special woman?"

"I never tell."

"Okay," he laughed, and gave me the keys.

On the way to the mountains I stopped at a sporting goods store and purchased my weapon without a question. I had a talent with it as a boy, and I was delighted to learn my skill wasn't lost. At first I occasionally missed, but at the end of ten days I was perfect. I could hit any target within forty feet with deadly accuracy. For three straight hours I could throw a can, whirl a circle and then hit the can in the air.

I drove back and gave Benton his keys. He said, "You don't *look* dissipated."

"It's the air up there." I didn't mention I had fainted once.

He shook his head. "When I take a broad up there I come back bushed."

"Try taking your wife."

Benton grinned. "What would I do that for"

"So she won't have to make those clandestine flights to Frisco."

His face clouded, and then he laughed. "Oh! You're kidding."

"Sure." Actually, his wife had invited me to spend a weekend with her while Jim was off on one of his hunting trips. I guess only the good die young. Of course, I'm no longer young. I am insane, and that explains me.

I had been keeping track of my three victims. John Buckley is attempting to raise campaign funds. He was at his headquarters all day and when I saw him leave and walk for his car, I hurried to mine. I beat him home by several minutes. But

he surprised me and did not park in his garage.

It had been dark about a half hour. He entered by his front door and I heard his housekeeper express her surprise.

"I didn't expect you for dinner."

"No," he answered. "I'm changing clothes. I have a speaking engagement."

I checked my watch. I could spend hours waiting for him. Some one could spot me in the bushes. I heard someone come out his front door and I chanced a look. It was his housekeeper with her coat on. I sneaked around the back and tried his rear door.

It was locked.

I needed to get in! An idea occurred and I hurried to my car and drove two blocks to a gas station's telephone. I called him and when he answered, I said, "I'm a promoter, Mr. Buckley. I've discovered a fantastic way to raise campaign funds. May I see you right away, or do I contact another candidate?"

"What is it?"

"Oh, no. We make a deal first."

"Couldn't we meet tomorrow?"

"Sorry, it's got to be started tonight. I can be at your place in two minutes. I'm at the drugstore."

"Very well, but make it quick."

When I got back to his house and rang the bell he called down from the second floor, probably out his bedroom window. "That you?"

"Yes, I just phoned."

"Be right down."

Buckley had completed his formal dress when he opened the door for me. He stared for a moment, and then there was instant recogniton.

"Brandon!" he exclaimed.

He attempted to close the door but my foot prevented him. He looked older and stouter. He had grayed considerably, but he was still the Major John Buckley who had lied and brought charges against me. I was an only survivor of a cowardly mistake he had made —my captain cursed him with his dying breaths. But I wound up blamed for the needless catastrophe.

Buckley saw the weapon in my hand. "What's that toy? Why are you here?"

"To kill you!"

The sudden fear on his face gave me an unexpected thrill. He had the choice of wrestling me or running. I figured he'd run, and he did. I rushed after him.

He entered a den at the end of the hall. He was at a polished black bar and had fumbled a

hand gun from a box. He wasted time using a military stiff-arm aim. Too late! I let him have it between the eyes. He was dead before he hit the carpet.

I retrieved the missle that had killed him. I looked down and uselessly said, "We're not really even. I only gave you a few frantic seconds for my miserable years."

I hadn't touched a thing in his house. I calmly walked out of his plush home unchallenged and drove away unseen, I think.

Next Friday at the club Gary said, "You seem in a better humor."

"I certainly am."

"Good. Say, uh, tomorrow and Sunday, Marge thinks we are going fishing. Okay?"

"I wish you wouldn't use me."

"Com'on, Scott. You know how it is."

"No, I don't. Marge seems pretty nice, to me."

"I can't take her," he groaned. "It's business. San Diego and Mexico with people I don't want her to meet."

"If they're that unsavory, you should not deal with them."

"Hell! That's where the money is. Your trouble is, you're so honest you wouldn't crook a finger. Everybody makes deals, from the politicians on down. Hey, did you

read about Honest John Buckley? Somebody got him with a hammer."

"Yes."

"Got him with a hammer. Caved a round dent in his skull. Right between the eyes. Surprised he'd let a guy with a hammer get that close. Of course, they say he made a try for his gun."

"He did."

"What?"

"Have a gun in his hand. Shall we golf tomorrow?"

Gary Sobin shook his head. "No, the big deal is on. Hey, I mentioned to Marge how crazy you were talking—"

"Did you tell her about the girl you met at the La Harbra course?"

"You think I'm crazy, Scott?"

"Perhaps. Suppose I tell Marge about her?"

"Why," he smiled. "I'd kill you."

I grinned. "See? This week you're talking of killing."

"Okay, okay. Only, you sounded serious."

"I've an excuse. I'm insane."

THE NEXT MAN up was Bruce Allen Cole, a successful attorney. The drunk who killed my wife. While grief-stricken I discovered Bruce Cole had been convicted of drunk driving before. But he was clever and got his driver's license back when it was suspended. I also learned that fifteen years ago, when he was twenty-four, and drunk, he crippled a girl friend riding with him in an accident. He avoided a lawsuit on some technicality.

Not that it mattered.

I was astounded to learn his former record couldn't be used against him in the manslaughter charge for killing my wife. He was convicted and served thirty days. I have lived without Linda for eight years!

Bruce Allen Cole knows me. I attacked him in the court room, but was restrained. I assaulted him again when he got out of jail, but he had me put under a peace bond where I'd be bankrupt if I violated it by attacking him again. For Sally's sake I had to give up.

Not now! I've nothing to lose!

Bruce Cole has a cabin at a mountain lake. I drove up and rented a room at a motel in the village and watched for him. As usual, he came up for the weekend, but he brought guests. There wasn't a chance to kill him Saturday without witnesses. Sunday I again loitered among the pines near his cabin. But no opportunity.

I decided to try for him back in town. I returned to where I had hidden my car off the road and started back down the mountain. I intended to stop at the village motel and check out. I was halfway there when a new Lincoln with a madman at the wheel raced by me.

I was forced to brake as he skidded to make the sharp turn. His tires screamed. I was amazed he made the turn. But I knew who was driving the red convertible: Bruce Cole!

I was another madman at the wheel. I speeded up and in a blinding rage I shot past him, then cut him off suddenly. We both braked and skidded onto the dirt shoulder of the road. It was more his skill than mine that prevented our vehicles from colliding. My engine died.

He got out of the convertible and removed his gold-framed dark glasses. He was dressed in

a blue turtle neck sweater with matching pressed slacks. He came right up to my window.

"Thought I recognized you!" he cried. "What the devil you trying to do?"

He was thirty-nine, my size, and perhaps more than a worthy adversary if we came to blows. Perhaps not. He'd had a few drinks and he was more belligerent at the moment than shrewd, to my advantage. I suddenly slammed my door open and it struck him. But he was quick enough to jump back and avoid the full force of the door. He kept his feet.

I brought my weapon up. The door swung back in my way. And Bruce Cole surprised me. He knew a lethal weapon when he saw one. He ducked and my aim was further spoiled as the door bumped me. He took off running. A fatal mistake. He should have grappled with me.

I stepped out of the car and reloaded simultaneously. I got him in the temple before he was thirty feet away. His lifeless body bounced against the tree he was racing for.

I checked to see there were no cars coming. I risked a quick search for the missle I used on him. I wondered if it had stuck in his temple, but it had not. When I stood up, a sharp branch of the tree above nearly put my eye out. As I instinctively rubbed my eyebrow it occurred that I could make his death appear an accident.

I did need the time! The police might learn I killed him. I had made a mistake at the motel. I used my handkerchief to break off the dry and jagged end of the thumb-thick branch that had grazed me. Then I kneeled down and forced the sharp edge of the stick into his head wound. I left it protruding. It would appear he had run into it.

The ground was leaves and dying vegetation. They wouldn't see my footprints. I used a branch from a leafy bush to erase all evidence of a second car on the dirt shoulder of the road. Then I drove off, taking the branch I used with me.

ON MONDAY his picture made the front page. The story confirmed that the young attorney was apparently running from someone and a sharp branch had pierced his skull. The police suspected foul play because of skid marks of a second car found on the pavement. A full investigation was underway.

I knew I should go after Steve Kenyon right away. But I was having more dizzy spells, and only rest helped. Wednesday I felt better. I was about to

leave for San Diego when the phone rang.

It was Gary Sobin. "Don't you go to your office anymore?"

"Taking a vacation." I told him I was just leaving but he insisted he had to see me. I waited for him. He walked in angry.

"Things blew up for me! You got a drink?"

"Help yourself." He knew which kitchen cupboard and he walked in and poured two generous drinks. I added water to mine. "What happened?"

"I was crossed! Can you lend me some money?"

"Sure. How much?"

"Several hundred. A thousand if you can. Marge kicked me out and drew all the money from our joint accounts. She started a divorce."

"How come?"

"She hired a private eye. The bum caught me with a girl, pictures and all. Can you imagine anything like that in this day and age?"

"Marge is an old fashioned girl—"

"Nuts! You don't know what a witch she is. You don't really know her. You've only seen her when she's on uppers! In humor!"

"Don't say things you'll be sorry for. I'll reason with her."

"No, thanks! I mean it, Scott. Stay away from her. I never told you, but she's on dope and has been for years. It's just as well we're finished."

"Okay, wait!" I wrote him a check for fifteen hundred dollars. He looked at it and then thanked me. It seemed to calm him, but there was more. I asked, "What else has got you riled? You knew Marge was fed up with your cheating."

"Yeah, sure. Well, my business deal—Let me ask you, Scott. What do you think about marijuana?"

"I don't use it."

"You wouldn't. It was on the California ballot and a third of the people voted for it."

"So? That figures twice as many voted against it."

"Means nothing. The liquor industry was fighting it. They don't want people using pot instead of buying their booze. Even the cigarette companies are geared for marijuana; it's gonna be legalized."

"So?"

He finally admitted that he had arranged a huge shipment of marijuana in from Mexico and had been cheated out of a fifty thousand dollar commission.

"Fifty grand!" he said bitterly.

"Win some, lose some."

"Not this time. He gets away with it I'm out of business."

"You have another recourse?"

"One! Kill him!" Sobin sneered.

In sports Gary played the odds in his favor. He was ruthless to a point, but seldom jeopardized himself. He suddenly asked if I was headed to San Diego. I was surprised. "How did you guess?"

"It all adds. You're going down to kill Steve Kenyon, the guy who murdered Sally. He slipped her the LSD she couldn't handle. I know, because I talked to your doctor. He told me you had a terminal disease and had three months at the most. I'm sorry as hell, Scot."

"Another drink?"

"Sure." I poured them full and this time I didn't add water. He sipped his and said, "You already killed one man on your list. I knew you hated that attorney, Bruce Cole. You tried to tear him apart with your fists. You knew you were dying so you had nothing to lose by killing him. But it beats hell out of me how you managed it."

There wasn't any reason not to tell him. I had the strong hunch he had come to ask me to kill a man for him. I said, "With a slingshot."

"What?"

He couldn't believe it. I went out to my car and got it. It is a Y of quarter inch steel that bends back below the grip to use the wrist for a brace. I said, "I use the strongest rubber available. And I shoot these steel balls. They are about the size of a marble."

He exhaled a whistle. "God, yes, they would be deadly." He checked my face. "And you always did have uncanny accuracy. Can you hit a moving target?"

"Seldom miss."

"The impact must be tremendous!"

"It is, at short range." I explained how I had plunged the stick into Cole's temple afterwards. He suddenly snapped his fingers and grinned.

"You've murdered two of 'em! John Buckley wasn't killed with a ballpeen hammer! You got him between the eyes with a steel ball!"

"I'm glad you're not a cop."

"What did Buckley do to you?"

"I had my reason. Who do you want me to kill for you?"

Gary slowly broke into a grin. "I knew you'd guess before I could explain. I got a surprise for you, though. I want you to kill the same guy you're after—Steve Kenyon! He crossed me out of the money. I mainly came here to tell you he isn't in San Diego. He has a place up here at Malibu. Kiss him off for both of us. Damn—with a slingshot you could get away with murder."

"Not really. I've goofed. I gave a false name at the village motel near Bruce Cole's place, but the clerk looked out the door at my car and copied down my license number. When the police check with the DMV they'll learn I was there, giving a wrong name. They'll know I did it!"

"Yeah, but it'll be too late, then. Hell, I'm sorry, Scott."

"Forget it."

"About the loan. Not sure when I can pay it back."

"Doesn't matter. Where are you staying?"

"I'll rent a place."

"Stay here. I've willed the house to you."

I gave him the keys from the cupboard and walked right out the door before he could thank me. I had my binoculars with me.

Kenyon's Malibu house was on the beach side of the highway. There were other homes and fences adjoining it. The only way to the private beach was through a home. I parked across the highway up high on a rather steep side street and used my binoculars. He had too much company.

I stayed overnight in Oxnard and came back early the next morning. There was only one car in the driveway and none in the triple carport. From my vantage point I watched the beach. A man who likes the beach should use it.

Seven minutes after ten I saw a man in trunks wading into the surf. It was Steve Kenyon and he was strolling down beach by himself.

I walked down to his house with my sling shot under my coat and knocked on the door. If no one answered I hoped to gain entrance by forcing the side door next to the carports. But a man who looked every bit a bodyguard pulled the door open. He was in shirt sleeves.

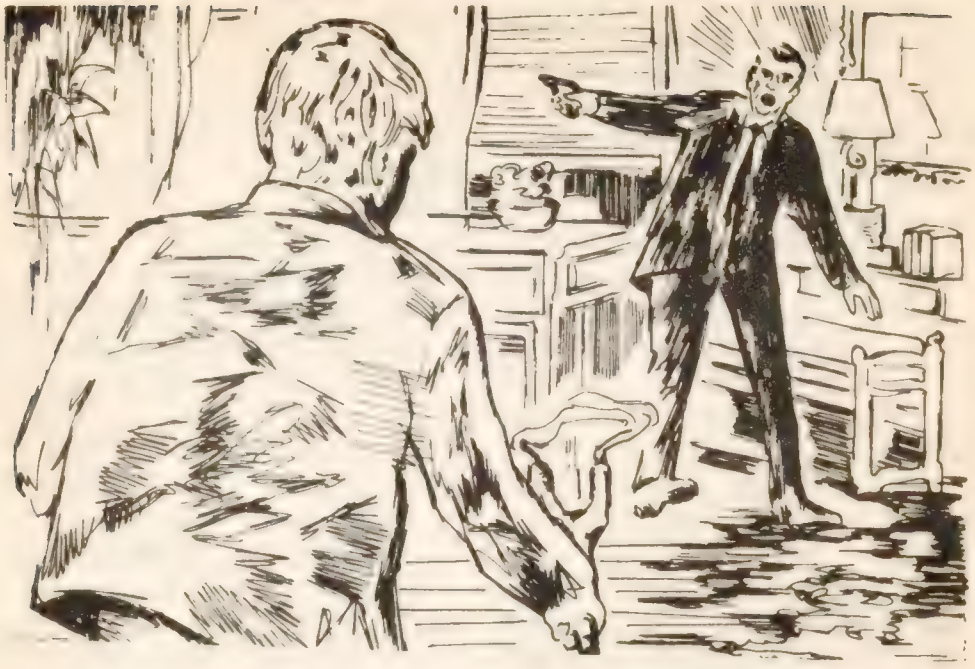
I announced genially, "I lost my girl friend to one of these houses along here. Oh! There you are!" I pointed in back of him.

He turned. A judo chop I remembered from the service took him out and I tied him with cord I'd brought for such emergencies. After I gagged him I waited in the enclosed game room under the house. It was level with the sand. When Steve Kenyon returned my slingshot was taut and ready.

"You again!" he braced to a stop. He was too far inside to try and run out. His eyes searched the stairs for his man to come running. "I told you—"

"Never mind!" I cut him off. "This is for my daughter, and for crossing Gary Sobin!"

Kenyon cocked his ugly head. "That fink? Now wait," he



growled. "You hurt me with that thing you'll be sorry. Besides, I don't know how you met Sobin, but he's the—"

I shot him. He looked surprised for an instant before he collapsed. I didn't bother to retrieve the missile this time. I felt sick. Dizzy. It was my condition. I climbed the stairs laboriously, wishing that I could have waited and heard his accusations against Gary. But I couldn't risk it. He was stalling, looking for the opportunity to jump me, and I was getting woozy and might have missed.

I felt better driving down the road. There was one more thing I should really do before turning myself in. Try and square things between Gary and Marge. I drove to her house. She checked me through the peephole but wouldn't let me in.

"I have to talk to you, Marge."

"Go away!"

"Marge, I've killed three men."

"I hope Gary was one of them!"

"I'm not joking!" She finally eased the door open.

She said, "I—don't think you are!"

She allowed me to come in. I sat down and told her every thing I had done, hoping to make her realize their quarrel was trivial. But she was a different Marge.

She said, "I'm sorry about you, Scott. It should happen to Gary! You don't know how I've hated him. He ran through my money, cheated, lied—"

I must have looked faint.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Dizzy spell. It'll pass."

"Perhaps I shouldn't tell you what I was going to?"

"Please do. Do you think anything matters to me now?"

"All right. But you won't like it. You killed the wrong man."

"What? Impossible!"

"Not Steve Kenyon! Oh, I know he's a rat and deserved to die, but he wasn't responsible for Sally leaping to her death."

"I was having Gary followed then. He was seeing a lot of your young daughter. Gary took her to Kenyon's party, and he was the one who slipped LSD in her drink. I know! He drugged me the same way shortly after we met. Yes, your good friend Gary hooked me on drugs a long time ago. I wanted to tell you about Sally. He threatened to cut off my supply. I don't need him any more. I have a new supply . . . for however long I live. I'm facing the same thing you are, Scott."

I was stunned. Was she lying? I reached for her arm. She always wore long sleeves. She willingly rolled her sleeves and let me see the myriad needle marks. It was incredible! I had to fight a hysterical urge to pound my fists on something. I knew why she told me, now. She knew what I was capable of and—

"Marge!" I accused her. "You want me to kill Gary for you!"

She made an evil smile. "Frankly, Scott, I don't give a damn! What difference does anything make?"

She lied! She did want revenge! I tore out of her house and drove straight to my home. Gary wasn't there, but I knew he'd return. It was funny! Everyone must have a list of people he'd like to kill.

It was after two in the morning when Gary walked in the door and turned on the light. I was standing in the hallway with the sling shot pulled and ready. The fear on his face told me his guilt, but he didn't understand.

"Wait!" he shouted. "You couldn't have believed Kenyon's lies! You killed him! It's in the papers!"

"Kenyon told me nothing."

"Marge! You saw Marge. She lied to you, Scott! She's hooked and—"

I had to shoot. I felt the start of another dizzy spell. I watched Gary pitch forward on his face as I sagged to the floor. The doctor had warned me the spells would start occurring frequently and finally one of them would. . .

by ALBERT AVELLANO

Funeral Talent

Mike was a peaceful man —with a growing reputation as a successful killer.

MIKE BRONSKI went into the Army almost before the ink on his high school diploma was dry. He had been told he would travel the world, but all he'd seen was Southeast Asia. He'd gone to Hong Kong and Hawaii for R and R a couple of times, but that didn't count. The specter of combat—past, present, or in prospect—had cast a pall of gloom over all his service years.

Because of this, he decided not to reënlist when his hitch was over. He wasn't interested in the cash bonus the recruiting officer promised, and the man's assurances of travel at government expense couldn't sway him, either—he'd already been tricked once.

With his mustering out pay in his pocket and his duffle bag at his side, he took the bus from Fort Ord down to San Diego instead of going home to Buffalo, New York. Once he arrived in San Diego, he asked

around the docks and in a few hours learned the mysteries of seamen's papers, maritime unions and hiring halls. Before long he had the paper work out of the way and had found a berth as a deck hand on a freighter bound for South America.

In the following three years, he visited both coasts of South America, Europe, Africa and Asia. He like the seaman's life, and the work seemed to agree with him. He filled out physically and gained the quiet maturity that world travel brings to the sensitive and perceptive. There was little chance he would ever become a ship's officer because he had no interest in the ships themselves—only in the quality of the life they offered and in the places they took him.

Mike Bronski might have continued to ship out indefinitely as a deck hand, wiper, oiler or whatever else was offered him, but he met Silvia Kiewicz on one of his trips home to Buffalo to visit his parents. Silvia was the daughter of one of his mother's old girl friends, and the meeting had been arranged with the typical heavy-handedness of matchmaking parents. The young woman was so embarrassed that Mike forgot his own anger in his efforts to make her feel more comfortable. Before the evening was over, he discovered he liked the plain, soft-spoken 19-year-old. He liked her very much.

He called her the next day. And the next. Within two weeks the parish priest was announcing their marriage banns.

They went to a resort in the Catskill Mountains for their honeymoon. That's where they really began to get to know each other. He told her about the places he had been and how he had lost the tip of his right index finger. "It was crushed between a pulley and a hawser when we were docking at Anchorage a year ago. My hands were so cold, I didn't even notice it right away."

He smiled in a way that conveyed not only his surprise at the accident, but something of the wonder he felt for the sea. He was certain some Polish ancester of his must have been a Baltic fisherman.

Silvia kissed him and rested her head against his chest. "You're going to miss the sea," she said.

She spoke softly, but it had struck him like a blow in the solar plexus. Until that moment he hadn't realized that he would no longer be going to sea. Indeed, that he *could* no longer go to sea. He could no

more leave Silvia behind than he could take her with him. His marriage had put him on the beach.

They returned to Buffalo and moved into a small apartment their mothers had fixed up for them while they were away. Mike found a job driving a delivery truck and held it for six unhappy months. Then one day he made a delivery near the Lake Erie shore and went home to Silvia full of little-boy excitement.

"Honey, if I ship out on the lakes, it won't be the same as taking a berth on an ocean-going vessel. Why, even a trip from here to Duluth takes hardly any time. And there are a couple of months every winter when the ice on the northern lakes forces shipping companies to suspend operations entirely. It'll be okay with you if I work on the lakes, won't it?"

He put his arms around her and hugged her to him. "It'll be okay, won't it?" he repeated.

She bit her lip before answering, but he couldn't see that. "Sure, Mike, if that's what you want. It'll be okay." Then she took his right hand and touched the damaged finger. "Just promise me you'll be careful," she said.

His first trip was on the *Katerina* from Erie, Pennsylvania, to Superior, Wisconsin, carrying a cargo of coal. For the return, the ship was loaded with 5,000 long tons of iron ore consigned to one of the steel mills outside Buffalo. As the ship was passing Keweenaw Point downbound on Lake Superior, Mike heard the crack of shots above the steady thump of the engine.

He left a steaming cup of coffee on the table in the galley and went out on deck to see what was going on. He found Bill Lutz, a tall, blond man in his early twenties, and several other deck hands who were off-duty, standing by the starboard rail. Lutz was wearing a black-leather, western-type holster over his Levis. It was tied down on his right thigh like a movie hero's, but one of the other men had the pistol. It was a 10-shot Hi-Standard .22 caliber automatic with a six-inch barrel.

Someone threw a small, tightly corked bottle out ahead of them, and the man holding the pistol fired five shots at it as soon as it bobbed to the surface. He missed, swore, then handed the pistol to the next man and the scene was repeated. It turned out that Bill Lutz, besides being the gun's owner, was also the best shot. He almost always hit the bottle.

Then the second mate ap-

peared, and Bronski figured the fun was over. He thought the pistol would end up in the captain's safe for the rest of the trip. Personal firearms are frowned upon on deep-sea vessels, and he had no reason to think the official attitude would be any different on the Great Lakes.

To Mike's surprise, the mate took a small revolver in a holster from his pocket and clipped it to his belt. Bill Lutz threw a bottle for him, and the mate drew and fired, holding his weapon with both hands. Compared to the .22 target pistol, it sounded like a cannon, but he missed with the five shots each contestant was apparently allowed. Then, as the bottle raced away toward the stern, Lutz drew and fired his Hi-Standard and broke it with his third shot. He gave the pistol a fancy spin before returning it to his hip.

Lutz seemed to notice Mike for the first time. He motioned him over. "Howdy, stranger," he said with a mock western accent. "Wanta try your hand?"

Mike shook his head. "No, thanks."

"Come on," Lutz urged. "I might as well beat you, too."

Whether it was to end the argument or because of Lutz's smug self-confidence, Mike didn't know, but he found himself reaching for the automatic. Because of its missing tip, he couldn't pull the trigger with his right finger. He shifted the pistol to his left hand, but that wasn't satisfactory, either. It felt too awkward. He returned the pistol to his right hand and put his second finger on the trigger. His damaged forefinger lay flat against the side of the weapon and he pointed the pistol skyward.

"Anytime you're ready, Hawkeye," Lutz said.

Bronski nodded and Lutz tossed a bottle far out ahead of them. It popped to the surface slightly astern of their position. When it did, Mike lowered pistol, fired once and the bottle exploded and disappeared.

A shout of approval went up from the other men, but Lutz seemed genuinely angry. "I'll bet you can't do that again," he challenged.

"I'll bet you're right," Mike replied with a grin. He gave him back the pistol and walked away.

As it turned out, that wasn't the end of it. The next time the water was relatively calm, Lutz was back on deck, showing off his marksmanship to the men. They were crossing Lake Erie on the last leg of the trip, and Mike was listening to a Cleveland FM station on his transistor radio.

"Come out on deck," one of the men called to Mike from the doorway. "It's your turn to shoot. You can't quit undefeated after one lucky shot."

Good-naturedly, Bronski joined the others at the rail. Lutz handed him the pistol, and he fumbled with it, trying to remember how he'd held it the first time. Finally, he put his second finger through the trigger guard and laid his short index finger along the frame.

"You ready, Lucky?" Lutz asked sarcastically.

Bronski stood with his elbow at his side and the long-barreled pistol pointing skyward, like a duelist in an old print. "Sure," he answered. "Throw it."

Lutz cocked his arm and threw the bottle. It hit the water with hardly a splash and sank from sight. When it broke the surface, it was well aft of Mike Bronski's spot at the rail, but he saw it immediately.

"There it is," Bronski said, dropping his arm and pointing toward it with the automatic. Just as all eyes were focused on the small, receding shape, he pulled the trigger and it shattered and sank.

This time there was no shouts of approval, only stunned silence. Everyone, including himself, had been certain his first performance had been luck. Now he had repeated it, casually, effortlessly. He was the only one who knew he hadn't even aimed the pistol.

For a moment he was too surprised to speak. Then, without taking his eyes off the lake, he said, "Someone throw another bottle."

A glass projectile arched out and hit the water 15 yards ahead of him. When it appeared, it was bobbing on the water 20 yards astern. He pointed the pistol at it and squeezed the trigger. The weapon cracked, and the bottle blew apart.

Three shots—three bullseyes. Luck? How could it be? But Bronski's imagination couldn't envision any other cause for the miracle he had performed. He handed the pistol back to Lutz and walked quietly away. Behind him someone said, "Let me see that pistol again. Maybe it's not as hard as I thought."

"Yeah, me, too," someone else chimed in.

Mike Bronski sat on his bunk in the crew's quarters, trying to puzzle it out. It wasn't as though he'd never fired a weapon before. He had, and he'd never been particularly good at it. He'd made marksman with the M-16 rifle, but it had taken a lot of practice. And he'd barely managed to qualify with the Colt .45 au-

tomatic. So how come, all of a sudden, he had turned into a crack shot? He wasn't any different than when he had gone through Army basic training and fought in Nam, so how come his shooting was so much better?

He looked curiously at his right hand and noticed the short index finger. Yes, he was different to that extent, at least—nothing was added, but one-half inch of finger was gone. He held his hand as though Lutz's pistol were in it. His stubby forefinger was pointing like the finger-revolver of a child playing cowboy. He rested the hand on the edge of the bunk and pointed the finger at a scuff mark on the tiled deck. Then he bent over and sighted along the extended finger. And he laughed.

That explained his fantastic shooting. His finger was aiming exactly where he wanted it. Pointing was instinctively accurate—at least, his seemed to be. The accident that had cost him his finger tip had forced him to pull the pistol's trigger with his second finger while *pointing* his forefinger.

Bronski was as pleased as anyone might be who had discovered that he possessed a talent he hadn't known about before. He thought some more and realized how lucky he had been to find out about it. If Lutz had owned a revolver, its cylinder would have protruded, keeping him from pointing his finger parallel to the barrel. For that matter, most automatic pistols would be unsatisfactory. He couldn't have gotten the results he had by resting his finger against a moveable slide or any surface that wasn't perfectly flat and in alignment with the pistol barrel.

Now that he had it figured out, he wanted to take a few more shots with Lutz's Hi-Standard automatic. He got back on deck just as the group was breaking up. He approached Bill Lutz, "Can I take a couple more shots?" he asked.

"Get your own pistol," Lutz said coldly and turned away.

Bronski would have taught him the trick, but now he decided to keep it to himself.

In the next few days, almost everyone on board either complimented Bronski on his shooting or told him he had heard what a wizard he was. It became clear from what was said that, until Bronski had come along, Lutz had no competition. Now he had not only been beaten, easily and decisively—the victor had done it using Lutz's own pistol.

Lutz was a poor loser at best, Bronski was told, so he had better watch out for him. "He'll

try to sucker you into some kind of contest he feels certain he'll win."

Lutz didn't, though. He didn't even talk to Bronski and, when they passed on deck, he seemed to look right through him.

More weapons began to appear. The gun laws in New York and Pennsylvania were pretty stiff, but the *Katerina* put in at ports in states with more lenient regulations. Whenever she did, one or two more pistols showed up as soon as the ship cleared port and was out of sight of land. The deck hands, and even the wipers and oilers, began to wear sidearms as they worked, only to tuck them back into their lockers as soon as the ship neared land. There was a high turnover among the deck hands, but almost every one that took more than a trip or two aboard the *Katerina* began to wear a tied-down pistol, Western style.

At one stop, Mike Bronski went ashore to put solid ground under his feet for a few minutes. He passed a waterfront pawnshop and spotted a Hi-Standard .22 in the window. He went in and bought the pistol along with a carton of 500 rounds of ammunition and a Western-style holster. It was about time he wore a weapon, too, he figured. He was beginning to feel naked alongside the men who did.

Then, one day almost two months after Bronski bested him, Lutz announced a new game. The task was to draw, fire and hit a bottle or any other thrown object before it hit

the water. The first person he challenged was Bronski. "An' jus' to make it interesting, let's make a little side bet—say a hundred bucks," Lutz suggested.

"Don't do it," someone whispered to Bronski. "He's been practising on the fantail for weeks."

"I'll shoot with you," Bronski told Lutz, "but I won't bet."

"Whatsa matter—chicken?" Lutz sneered.

"I can't afford to lose, so I won't gamble," Bronski said simply.

They went to the stern with a crowd of onlookers accompanying them. Lutz strode confidently ahead, carrying a box of half-pint pickle jars the cook had saved for him.

"This's the way we'll do it," Lutz said. "We'll each shoot at ten different targets. One of the guys'll stand behind us and throw them. We don't draw till we spot the bottle, and we have to hit it before it touches the water or it's a miss. All clear?"

"Okay," Bronski said.

"You wanta go first?" Lutz offered.

"It's your game—you go first," Bronski said.

Lutz stood facing the lake with his knees slightly bent and his right hand hovering over the butt of his pistol. The wiper who had been selected to throw the targets tossed one high to the left. Lutz drew and fired a flurry of shots, breaking the jar when it was still fifteen or twenty feet above the water. He reloaded, caught the second bottle suspended at the top of its arc and hit it with one shot. It took four shots to break the third bottle, but he hit it well above the water. He smashed the fourth bottle easily. However, the fifth hit the water and sank from sight.

"If it doesn't surface, I musta hit it—right?" Lutz demanded, adding a new rule in the middle of the contest.

Bronski shrugged. It made no difference to him. "Okay," he agreed.

The bottle didn't come up. "That makes five!" Lutz announced triumphantly.

Lutz shattered the sixth and seventh, but missed the eighth completely. Even when he emptied his pistol as it bobbed on the surface, it eluded him and floated out of sight. He missed the ninth, too, and swore imaginatively. He waited a full three minutes, collecting his nerves, before giving the okay for the last bottle to be thrown. He broke it with one shot.

"That's eight out of ten," he said proudly.

Bronski slid a 10-round magazine into the butt of his

pistol, jacked a round into the firing chamber, and put the weapon in its holster. "Any time," he called over his shoulder, and then proceded to shatter the first eight pickle jars with one shot apiece. When he had two rounds left in his weapon and two bottles remained to be thrown, he said, "Toss the last pair at the same time." He blew them both apart.

Lutz, red-faced with humiliation and rage, stormed away.

Bronski wondered what he'd think of next. It came quicker than he had expected. A heavy curtain of sticky gray fog rolled across Lake Huron the following-morning. Every minute, the *Katerina*'s horn gave the regulation three blasts. As Bronski neared the stern while making a turn of the deck, the broad-shouldered shape of Lutz loomed before him.

"I'm a better shot than you are," Lutz accused petulantly. "I *know* I am. I'm faster, too."

"That's not the way it's turned out so far," Bronski pointed out mildly.

"Yeah, well, you can't take pressure. That's why you wouldn't bet. Let's see how good you are when you're up against a man—when you know your life is on the line."

The horn gave three blasts and then went silent. Lutz continued, "The next time that horn sounds, go for your gun, because I'm going to. And if you try to run away, I won't wait for the horn."

Bronski was sure Lutz meant every word. He stood motionless, feeling his heart beat inside his chest. Then when the horn blasted, so did he. His pistol seemed to leap into his hand like a living thing, and he put two bullets into the center of Lutz's forehead before the other man's weapon had a chance to clear its holster.

The Coast Gurad boarded the *Katerina* at Port Huron, but it was just routine. Seamen had been lost on the Lakes before—Lutz wasn't the first. If he had slipped and fallen overboard, any shouts for help must have been smothered by the dense fog. That was the official decision.

Life aboard the *Katerina* went on as before. As soon as the ship was out of sight of land, the crew strapped on their sidearms. On any fair day and many fould ones, they could be heard blasting away at improvised targets.

The next time the fog rolled in, Bronski felt strangely apprehensive. He knew it would be a long time before fog ceased to remind him of Lutz. As he stood by the rail, listening to another ship's fog horn and try-

ing to estimate its distance, he heard a step behind him and turned around.

"Bill Lutz was my cousin," a tall seaman said. "He told me what he was gonna do, so I know what happened t'him. Now it's gonna happen t'you. The next time that horn sounds, you know what t'do."

Bronski didn't wait for the horn, and he fired only one well-placed shot. The official report on the missing man was the same as for Lutz, but Bronski thought everyone looked at him strangely, speculatively. He took all his gear with him at the end of the trip and didn't return to the *Katerina*. He worked at a shore job for a couple of months.

The Buffalo *Courier-Express* carried an article about the growing number of seamen missing on the lakes, and the need for increased safety precautions. No wonder the disappearances of Lutz and his cousin hadn't seemed unusual.

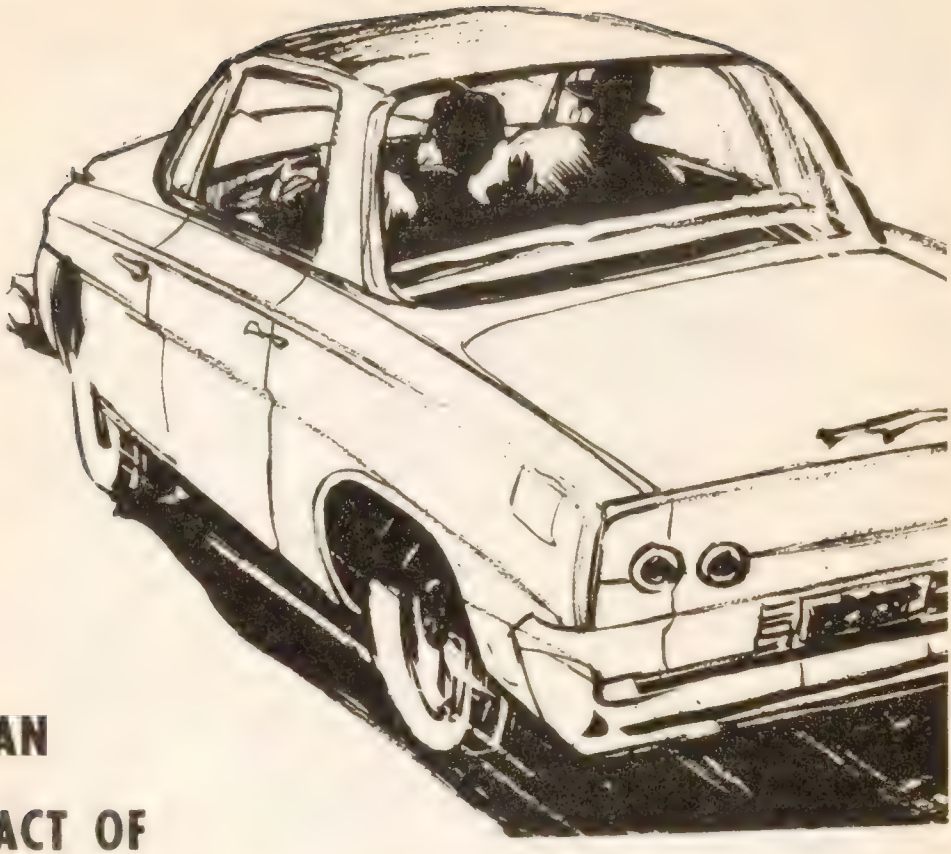
Finally, when he just had to feel a deck beneath his feet again, he signed aboard the *Neptune*, a small vessel in the tramp trade. He knew what to expect—short hauls, carrying pig iron, scrap, slag or whatever other cargo the owners could find, always ending up in some polluted backwater with the evil-smelling fumes of a foundry wilting his ears. It wasn't an appealing prospect, but it was better than the insanity that had overtaken everyone aboard the *Katerina*.

He boarded the *Neptune* a half hour before sailing, and one of the regulars, a pleasant-faced teenager, showed him to the crew's quarters. "I'm Larry Kryson," he said, offering his hand. "Just stow your gear in any empty locker and take any bunk that isn't already made."

Later, when the ship was underway, Larry introduced Mike to that part of the crew drinking coffee in the galley and walked back to the crew's quarters with his own locker. While Mike busied himself, arranging his gear, Kryson went to his own locker.

"Are you the Bronski who was on the *Katerina*?" Kryson asked, then answered his own question. "I guess you are. You're the right size and age, and you've a short index finger. You fit the description."

Bronski looked up to find that Kryson had strapped on a pair of single-action Colt revolvers. They hung low on his lean hips and were tied down with leather thongs. Kryson smiled, but there was no humor in it. "You don't look so fast to me," he said.



AN ACT OF SIMPLE HUMAN KINDNESS

Death. Funny how it can come so easily, without any warning. Or so hard, sometimes. With screams and . . .

by CHARLES W. RUNYON

AL WILBUR believed that most violence in the world was a result of people being unkind to one another.

That's why he picked up the hitch-hiker. As he pulled back onto the highway, he asked the man how long he'd been standing in that open stretch of country.

"Too long," grunted the hitch-hiker. "About two hours too long."

"People don't believe in kindness any more," said Wilbur. "It's a quality that's dying out of human nature."

The man gave a harsh barking laugh. "They were afraid I'd pull a gun, that's why they didn't stop. They thought I'd kill them and take their money."

A warning tremor rippled through Wilbur's nervous system. He let his gaze slide over to the man beside him. The rolled-up denim jacket in his lap was bulkier than it should have been: Wilbur hoped it contained the hitch-hiker's toothbrush, razor, soap and towel. That would account for his exceptionally clean appearance: shirt and levis ironed and starched, long jaw shaved so closely that a gloss overlaid the blued shadow of his beard. He had the long narrow skull Wilbur associated with religious fanatics and patriots.

"Or maybe. . ." the hitch-hiker said in his flat nasal voice, "maybe they figured I was wanted by the police. Like they might of seen pictures of me in the post office, scars and identifying marks and so on. So they drove on, ruther'n get hung up with a criminal type. Where you headed, fatso?"

Wilbur flicked another glance at his rider. A thin red scar curved around his throat, reaching from his adam's apple to his earlobe.

"I asked where you was headed. Don't you hear good?"

"Oh. . .Kansas City." The moment Wilbur said it he wished he'd lied. Kansas City was over a hundred miles away; he didn't want to carry the man that far. He didn't want to carry him another mile, but he saw no way out of it now.

He looked at the stream of cars crawling ahead of him down into the broad valley. He thought of mothers, fathers, lovers on honeymoons, kids visiting grandmas, students going home from school and servicemen on furlough. He wished the hitch-hiker were riding with one of them—any of them.

"Look at 'em," snarled the hitch-hiker. "What's it all for, anyhow? What is the goddam point of it all? Go someplace you hope will be better'n the place you left. But it never is. Get tired so you can rest. Rest so you can work to get money to eat so you can work and get tired again." He snorted. "What you gonna do in K.C., fats?"

"Inventory. . .a company's warehouse stock," stammered Wilbur. "I'm an auditor."

"You ever get a chance to slip anything in your pocket?"

Wilbur's fingers tightened convulsively on the wheel. "I'm bonded. I wouldn't think of taking anything."

"Why do it then?"

"It enables me to support my wife and kids."

"What do *you* get out of it?"

"I don't know. Satisfaction."

"Ha," said the hitch-hiker.

A fly came through the open window and collided with the windshield, circled back, and hit it again. Wilbur let his mind follow the fly as it charged the barrier, bzzzz, thip! bzzzz, thip! It made him think of long summer afternoons on the river when he was a kid. He wished he were on the river now.

"How many kids you got?" asked the hitch-hiker.

Wilbur looked into the empty blue eyes, then looked quickly away. "Two boys. Three and seven."

"What do they do for you?"

"They love me."

"I'll bet," said the hitch-hiker.

Wilbur clamped his jaws tight and said nothing. He noticed that the fly had stopped buzzing and started crawling across the windshield. Soon he'd reach the side-vent and fly out into the open. . .

The hitch-hiker trust out his thumb and crushed the fly into a sticky blotch. Wilbur felt rage trembling inside him. *It's my car. If I'd wanted the fly dead I'd have killed it myself. . .*

A sign read: GAS-FOOD. Wilbur let up on the accelerator. "I guess I'll get her filled up."

"Your gauge reads three-quarters full."

"It doesn't work right," Wilbur said through dry lips. "Anyway, I have to go to the john."

Without looking at his rider, Wilbur steered his Plymouth over the viaduct and pulled in beside the pumps. He devoted his full attention to switching off the engine, moving the gearshift into park position, and setting the emergency brake. By then the attendant was washing his windshield with a squirt-bottle and a scrap of chamois.

Wilbur climbed out of his car, said, "Fill 'er up," and walked toward the shingle marked *men.* Inside, he washed his hands and found himself looking in the mirror at a balding, thirty-seven-year-old C.P.A. whose flesh had begun to balloon under his chin.

"You're a yellow dog," he muttered, narrowing his eyes. "Your kindness is just a front. The fact is that you're afraid to stand up to people."

Outside, he lit a cigaret and decided to call the Burton Feed & Grain Company and tell them what time he'd arrive. Then he'd tell the hitch-hiker he had to turn back. It would be a black mark on his conscience, but it couldn't be helped.

Actually, thought Alvin Wilbur, *I'll be saving his life to leave him here. He makes me so nervous I'd probably run off the road before we got halfway to K.C.*

As he passed the service department, Wilbur saw the attendant stooping down to take a tire off the rim while the hitch-hiker

slouched against the wall. He had the loose-jointed ease Wilbur had seen in prison inmates—a bleak watchfulness above a slack, half-smiling face.

Wilbur went into the office, thumbed a dime into the slot, and started dialing Burton's nine-digit number from memory. As he reached the fifth digit the vibrant echo in the receiver turned flat, like a lead slug dropped on a counter. He turned to see the hitch-hiker standing just inside the doorway with a half-smile on his face.

"I was. . .calling Kansas City."

"I jerked the wire loose."

"Wh— why?"

The hitch-hiker stepped forward and shot out his right fist in a stiff-armed jab which sank deep into Wilbur's paunch. Wilbur doubled over and sank to the floor, spewing up the coffee he'd drank before leaving home. He felt the rankness of fear, mingled with pain, nausea, and the acrid smell of vomit which dribbled down his shirt. He looked up through watery eyes and saw that the hitch-hiker had unrolled the jacket. In his hand was a snub-nosed revolver with mother-of-pearl grips.

"In there," said the hitch-hiker, jerking his head toward the service department. "Don't fool around with me."

The attendant lay on his stomach with a long, deep dent behind his right ear. Just looking at it made Wilbur's head ache. There was a heavy iron bar lying on the floor beside the man. His open eyes were fixed without interest on the black bladder of an inner-tube half out of its casing.

Wilbur recalled the time he'd stepped barefoot on a Russian thistle. There hadn't been any pain at first, just a numbing shock that paralyzed all feeling. He felt that way now. He stared at the hitch-hiker and felt a cold dryness prickling the inside of his mouth.

"You. . . ?"

"Me." The Hitch-hiker's smile curved up beside his nose and angled down toward his chin, a diagonal slash across his face.

"Why?"

"He kept looking at me. I figured he'd heard the report on the radio."

Wilbur tried to swallow, but his throat was too dry. His mind seemed to have stepped out to lunch. Rather than frame his own thoughts, he could only repeat the last phrase he'd heard:

"Report on the radio?"

"Yeah. They found a dead man and a woman and two kids in the trunk of a car. Somebody had seen them pick up a hitch-hiker a little ways down the road." Again the smile gashed his face. "The guy was dressed like me. Looked like me. Funny coincidence."

"Was it. . .you?" Wilbur asked

the question, then held his breath, hoping the man would say it hadn't been him, so they could both go on pretending that nothing had happened, all was normal. Perhaps they could say that the attendant had slipped and fell, and then Wilbur could go away and forget. . .

"Yeah, it was me."

"Oh, my. . ." Wilbur moaned softly.

"They were from Illinois," he said. "Going to some church revival. The youngest one had a toy that talked when he pulled a string. 'Happiness is a warm blanket.' It kept saying stupid stuff like that until I couldn't take any more. I threw it out the window and the guy stopped and told me to get out of the car. I shot him from the back seat and then I shot his wife. The kids wouldn't quit hollering so I shot them too. . ."

Wilbur felt the roiling of nausea in his stomach and knew he was about to be sick again. He wanted desperately to cancel out everything in his life which had led him to this place at this time.

If he'd left home earlier. . .if the Burton audit had not been scheduled today. . .if he'd majored in economics instead of accounting. . .if he'd married Debbie instead of Edna. . .

WILBUR'S thoughts dissolved at the sound of a car turning off the highway. The hitch-hiker snapped his fingers.

"Get him out of sight. Then put on his jacket. You can handle the customers."

Wilbur carried the attendant into the storeroom and covered him with a greasy tarpaulin. He pulled on the cap and jacket—still warm and smelling faintly of sweat—and thought: *Someday I'll remember this and wake up screaming, but right now I can't think of anything but staying alive.*

Wilbur went out to the pumps. A man in a new black Lincoln told him to fill it up. A woman with copper-tinted hair got out and asked where the ladies' room was. Wilbur pointed to the shingle and she tottered off across the concrete, balancing on high heels. A teen-age girl followed, with flowered bell-bottom slacks flapping around her sandaled feet.

Wilbur could see the shadow of the hitch-hiker behind the plate glass window of the office. He took the hose off the hook and tried to recall the half-seen actions of a thousand attendants. Turn on the pump, insert the hose in the tank and then. . *.oh, yeah, you squeeze this thing and when the tank gets full the pump cuts off and a bell rings.*

He found the bottle of window-cleaner and the chamois, ran it through the ringer and

started to work on the Lincoln's windshield, thankful that the spattered insect corpses required his full attention.

The customer stood on the other side of the car gnawing his cigar, his hands thrust in the pockets of a seersucker jacket. Wilbur wondered if he sensed the nearness of death. He lifted the wiper blade to run the chamois under it and said quietly:

"The guy inside is a homicidal maniac. You better get your family out of there."

The customer stiffened and stared at Wilbur. "What did you say?"

In a mental flash Wilbur saw the man screeching off and bringing back the police. . .uniformed men crouching behind their cars in a blazing gun battle. . .the crumpled body of Alvin Wilbur forgotten beside the pumps. . .

"Mumbling to myself," said Wilbur. "Oil and water okay?"

"Oh. Yeah. . .yeah." The customer took the cigar from his mouth, scowled at its raddled tip, then put it back in his mouth and scowled at the countryside.

Wilbur wondered how many similar things lay in his own past, miracles seen and not comprehended and therefore erased from his mind as though they'd never happened.

Ping! went the bell on the gas pump. Wilbur hung up the hose, checked the gauge reading, and walked into the office. The hitch-hiker was leaning against the wall with his right hand inside his rolled-up jacket. He smiled and nodded at the customer, who stood fretfully puffing his cigar while Wilbur filled out his credit slip.

The girl came in and demanded a dime for a coke, then hitched her hip onto the waist-high cooler and drank. Wilbur could tell by the arch of her back and the thrust of her young bosom that she was aware of the hitch-hiker's eyes upon her.

She smiled at him, her lips wet. "I get so *dry* when I travel."

The hitch-hiker smiled in a way that made Wilbur's hands hot and sticky. "Where you been?"

"Visiting my cousins in Denver."

"Great town," said the hitch-hiker. His eyes glittered.

"I hurt my back going off the high board. Right there." She pointed at the concave curve of her lower back, and the hitch-hiker pursed his lips in sympathy.

"You're lucky you didn't hurt your kidneys," he said.

Wilbur, who was trying to work the man's credit card into the stamping machine, formed a mental picture of the girl's back laid open, her kidneys ripped naked and bleeding from her body. He hit the handle of the

stamp machine, separated the receipt from the original, and gave it to the customer along with his plastic card.

"Thank you sir, and have a good trip," he said.

The customer stuffed the items in his jacket pocket and opened the door. "Come on, Mimi. Finish that in the car."

Her chin came up. "I'll finish it here if you don't mind."

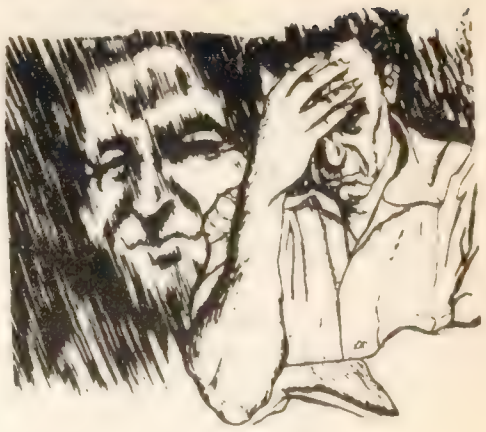
The customer reached the girl in two strides, jerked the bottle from her hand, and slammed it down on the cooler. He seized her arm above the elbow, but she jerked free and backed away. Bending at the waist, she hissed through clenched teeth:

"I'm going to the bathroom. *Do you mind*!"

She whirled and stamped out. The customer, without looking at either Wilbur or the hitch-hiker, walked out to his car and stood with the door open, drumming his fingers on the roof. He looked furious.

The hitch-hiker pushed himself away from the wall and stood with his chin raised in a listening attitude. Wilbur heard the muffled sounds from the ladies' room—door slam, thunk of toilet seat, tinkle of water—and wondered what he'd be thinking now if he'd already killed five people for no good reason. Without moving from behind the desk he said:

"You'll just be right where you



are, with another corpse behind you."

"Shut your stupid fat mouth," said the hitch-hiker softly, without moving his head.

Wilbur heard a gurgling rush of water from the bathroom. What would the girl do now? Of course: primp in front of the mirror, push her hair around, pinch a couple of pimples, anything to punish her father for treating her like a child.

The hitch-hiker took a sideways step toward the door. Wilbur clamped his fingers around the credit-stamping machine.

"I don't believe I ever met a completely evil person in my life," he said, "until now."

"I told you—!" The hitch-hiker whirled, his blue eyes fired with rage.

Wilbur saw his hand start to come out of the rolled-up jacket. With a wide swing of his arm, he threw the stamping machine at

the hitch-hiker's head. It missed by a yard and crashed through the plate-glass window. The shrieking, glittering cascade ripped away the last of Wilbur's self-control.

He charged around the desk, aware that his enemy was struggling to get his gun untangled from the jacket. Wilbur's fist—which he couldn't recall clenching—struck the hitch-hiker in the jaw and knocked him back against the coke-machine.

Wilbur felt his chest swell with some new emotion, joy, fear, triumph, he didn't know what it was, he didn't care, he only wanted to kill the man, to destroy his body and his brain, not with the impersonal power of a gun, but with the strength of his own hands. He lunged forward and wrapped his fingers around the hitch-hiker's throat. Together they fell and rolled on the oil-stained concrete, but Wilbur's grip didn't loosen.

He felt the ridges of a man's windpipe under his thumbs and squeezed with all his strength. He no longer felt human; he was an instrument of vengeance for all the people who'd been killed, particularly the kid with the happiness toy. It could have been his own kid—

Suddenly the man's knees came up between them. Wilbur felt himself lifted, thrust up and back. The edge of the desk smashed against his hips. He caught a glimpse of the Lincoln rocketing away from the pumps, white faces pressed against the windows, staring back in his direction.

Then his enemy was upon him again, his fists tearing at his stomach, hammering his chest, pounding his guts. Wilbur couldn't breathe. Bitter nausea clawed at his stomach, and he knew his ulcers had broken open. A cold flame of weakness raced through his veins. He fell back on the desk, gasping for breath.

He managed to get his legs up and thrust his feet against the enemy's chest, but succeeded only on pushing himself backward off the desk. His head struck the concrete like a ringing gong. Stars burst inside his brain, a black cloud drifted in front of his eyes. . .

Vaguely he heard the clatter and shriek of sliding drawers, then the edge of the heavy desk came crashing down across his thighs, grinding him down into the concrete, holding him fast.

The hitch-hiker leaned his elbows on the desk and looked down, peeling his lips back from boodstained teeth.

"Now you know how *I* feel."

Wilbur knew. It prickled like a thistle in his throat. It was *Hate*, the sting of sulphuric acid in his nostrils, rats gnawing at his stomach. Helpless frustrated

rage, magnified ten times because there was nothing he could do about it.

Except. . .what was that hard object beneath his right leg? Of course, all service stations these days kept a pistol on the premises. It must have fallen out of one of the drawers. He slid his hand down, touched the corrugated grip, and spoke in a quavering, pleading voice:

"Don't kill me, please!"

"I won't kill you. You know what I'm gonna do?" He leaned over the desk and brought his gaze so close that Wilbur could see the flecks of spittle at the corners of his mouth. "I'm gonna douse this building with gas, and then I'm gonna strike a match. There'll be flames, and explosions, and when it's all over there'll be nothing to show what hap—"

Wilbur tilted the gun barrel upward and squeezed the trigger.

Two highway patrolmen came ten minutes later. They'd been flagged down by the man in the Lincoln. Their radio hummed and crackled while they examined the bodies, the one in the storeroom and the one on the floor behind the overturned desk. They'd seen a lot of corpses, and their actions were clinical, unhurried and unemotional.

The tall sandy-haired trooper took down the story, along with Wilbur's name and address. When he finished, he closed his pad and slid the pencil into its loop.

"What I don't understand," he said, "is why there's three holes in this guy's stomach, going in the front, and then this one in the back of his head."

Relunctantly, Wilbur sent his mind groping back through the red fog of rage and pain. "He was screaming, kicking."

"And you thought he might get his gun again?"

"Oh no. I knew he was dying. But it looked like he might suffer for several minutes, so. . ." he shrugged. "I performed an act of simple human kindness. I'm actually a very warm-hearted person."

Next Month—a New Exciting Novelet:

COME TO MY MURDER

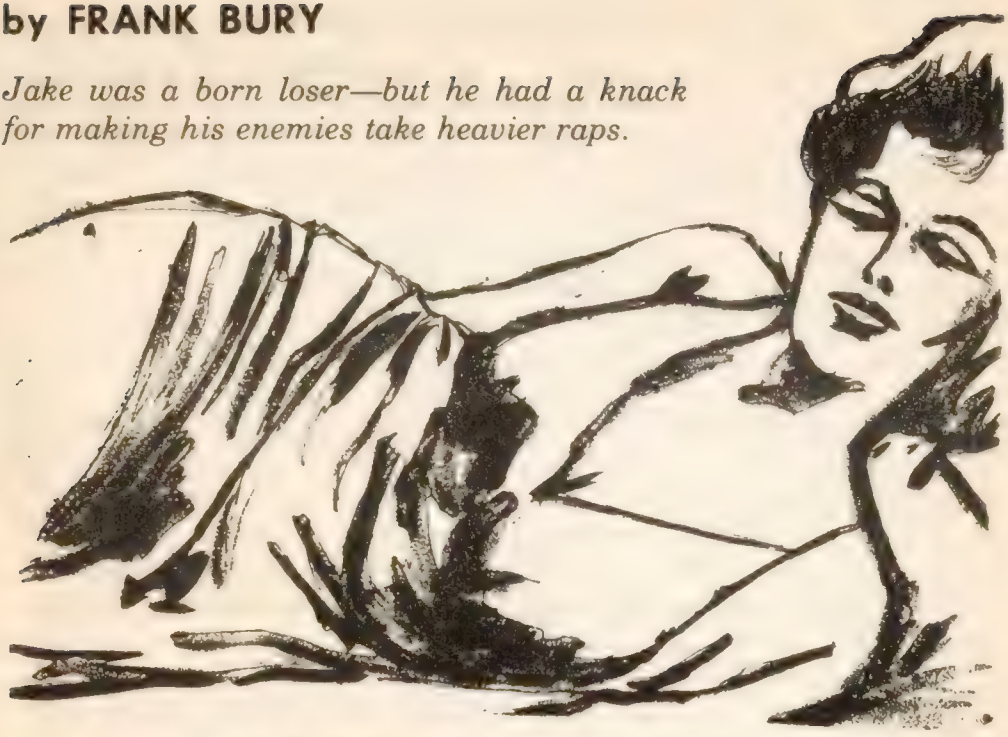
The killer struck openly in a crowded café—and then vanished into thin air.

by PETER GERMANO

---

by FRANK BURY

Jake was a born loser—but he had a knack for making his enemies take heavier raps.



The Big Fix

"YOU LOOK HOT," the barmaid said. "Just ready for a cool drink."

"I feel hot, too," Jake told her. "It's warm work humping those apple-barrels in the market."

He wished he could stop sweating. Nerves, of course—not the apple-barrels.

The girl behind the bar looked like June. He felt a stab of remorse. He hadn't really wanted to kill her, though some might say the little bitch had asked for it.

In her strange way, she'd been fond of him. She'd even tried to help him. But that hadn't made up for her outward contempt, the humiliation.

Hardly more than half a glass of beer had passed his lips when the two men closed in on him. A pincer movement, one on each side, quietly and efficiently.

Both men seemed huge. Just one of them would have been enough. After all, Jake was only small, slightly built, nervous-looking, incapable—one would say—of violence.

"Your name Jake Culley?" The

larger of them put the question.

"It is."

"What's that in your jacket pocket? Mind if we see?"

Jake shrugged, smiled bleakly. "Okay, the game's up, isn't it? Some kind friend grassed on me, eh? How much did you pay the lousy little snout for his tip-off?"

"Never mind that," one of the detectives said.

Jake pulled the packets from his pocket. A bundle of white paper packets, each with its dose of deadly ecstasy, fastened together with a rubber band. He handed them to the C.I.D. man, who opened one, looked at the contents, screwed his face up with disgust.

"Quite a few 'fixes' in this lot. What do you charge the junkies for them? Two nicker a kick?. . .three?. . .five?"

Jake stared back in sullen silence.

"Who pays you for running them around? Who's the pusher?"

"I never knew who the pusher was," Jake said. "A geezer acts as go-between and gives me my commission. I don't know this one's name either."

"Or maybe you're just suffering from loss of memory," the detective said acidly. "How much more of this dope have you got at home?"

Jake tightened his lips sulkily.

"Let's go back to your pad and have a look, shall we?" the C.I.D. man suggested. He wrapped a big hand tightly round Jake's arm. "Come on."

Jake and the two detectives got into the police-car. One of them asked "Where to?" and Jake told them with reluctant hesitation. The car moved off, nosing its way to where his wife lay murdered.

"You got any kids?" one of the policemen asked.

"No."

"Thought not. If you had, you wouldn't be peddling this filthy dope to the teenagers. Are you married?"

"Yes."

Not strictly true any more, he thought. *Was* married. Now a widower. A very, very short time a widower. June's body would scarcely have had time to grow cold.

MAYBE the remorse he felt sprang from his dislike of violence. It wasn't that he minded her being dead. She had preferred Tony Brunner for a long time now.

Looking back, Jake realized he should have known better than to marry her. If he hadn't been such a simpleton, it probably would never have happened.

She had been as anxious as hell to get out of that club where she worked as a hostess. He hadn't quite realized what a hostess was. When you came to London from a small provincial backwater, there was a hell of a lot you had to learn.

"I'm joining a Group," he had told her excitedly. "As a guitarist. Reckon I'll be really in the money in about six months."

She had believed him. It was the prospect of money that had attracted her. Not so much his naive boyish appeal as the dough he looked like making.

He had no illusions about himself. As a lover he had always been as hammy as anyone could be. That didn't matter such a lot to June. She could have all the affairs on the side that she wanted.

It was sheer bad luck when the Group flopped. Even worse luck to find that guitarists were ten a penny, and guitarists a lot better than himself were looking for other ways to scratch a living.

So Jake had got the job with a wholesaler in the fruit and vegetable market. The fact that his old man had been a greengrocer had helped. Not much money, but enough to pay the rent on their crummy flat and buy a few necessaries at the supermarket.

He had known June wouldn't be satisfied, and she wasn't.

"I've got a part-time job," she had said, sullen and aggressive. He was no longer in any doubt that she not only didn't love him any more—if she ever did—but that she even felt sorry for him.

"Where?"

"At Tony Brunner's Discotheque—helping out."

"You know what they say about Brunner? He'll make a pass at anything in a skirt."

His wife's dark eyes smouldered. "Why the hell should I care what they say? If you want to keep me prisoner in this rotten hole of a flat, then you'd better go and earn a bit more money. If not, then let me earn a bit extra in whatever way I like."

"I'll make the grade one of these days," Jake said. "Then it'll be all right, love, won't it? I mean, if I could raise the capital I could open my own shop. . ."

"Where would you raise the capital?"

He smiled wearily. "Maybe your new boss would lend it. He's got plenty, I believe." His face darkened. "Not that I'd want you to sell yourself or anything. By God, if I thought he was making a pass at you, I'd carve him up."

"You?" She laughed at him

derisively. "You couldn't carve up a pound of liver!"

It stung like hell, but he knew she was right. He would never stand a chance in a brush with Tony Brunner.

"Big" Brunner they sometimes called him. A large heavily-built man, quick-tempered. He had a lot of friends, too, fellows you wouldn't care to turn your back on at night in a dark alley.

And, of course, Brunner had money. You could see that by his snazzy car and swish clothes.

How would June earn the money Brunner gave her? What would he expect from her? Maybe it wasn't important any more if she had an affair with him. And yet the thought of Brunner mauling her about made him break out in a prickly sweat.

One day she had said to him: "Do you really want to make some lolly?—some lolly worth having, I mean?"

Jake looked blankly at her. "Why?"

"Tony feels sorry for you, as I do. He thinks you've had a raw deal. He says if you really want to get a bit of capital behind you, he might help."

"Conscience, is it?"

"How do you mean?"

"A reward for allowing him to mess about with my wife? I saw what happened in his car when he brought you home."

June's face flushed a deep red. Her eyes blazed. "Look," she said angrily, "Tony's a good bloke. He's doing you a favour. Do you want to go on living in this stinking hole?"

Jake swallowed. He supposed, deep down, he was still in love with her. He was prepared to believe that she might—just *might*—have his interests sincerely at heart.

"What's he want me to do?" he asked.

"You'd better talk to Tony himself about that."

Jake had gone to talk to Brunner. Like a good little boy. Weak as water. Pushed around as usual. And that's how he came to be selling "fixes" to the local junkies, putting more money into the pocket of a prosperous pusher named Brunner.

Flogging the heroin and coke meant six times the dough the fruit wholesaler was paying him. That needed a lot of resisting.

Maybe, he thought, if he made a pile quickly and could find a ritzier place and pamper June a bit, she might start respecting him again, might even get to loving him. . .

"You're so kind, so gentle," she had said once.

Big Brunner could never be

that. Brunner was too crude and violent. She'd find out, sooner or later, which of the two was better to live with.

Then came the moment he would never forget, when the taste of disillusionment was at its bitterest.

"You were quite right about Tony and me necking in the car," she said, a dreamy wistful expression on her face, as if she were reveling in telling him. "We've done it several times. I love him. Do you understand?"

"No, you couldn't love him," Jake said. "Not *him*. . ."

"I'm leaving you, Jake. I'm going away with Tony. It's all arranged. I'm sorry, but I've made up my mind."

"But you can't want to go and live with that cheap lousy crook! It doesn't make sense!"

"Look," June said, "I'll not have you calling Tony names. If anyone deserves to be called names, it's you. You're a weak-kneed, namby-pamby failure. You'll never be anything but a flop as long as you live. You aren't fit to clean Tony Brunner's shoes!"

He had always tried to be peaceable. He'd never let his temper get on top of him before. But now he knew he couldn't do anything about the great seething bubble of rage that rose up inside him.

"You hate me, don't you?" he snarled through clenched teeth.

"Yes!" she shouted at him. *"Yes!"*

"And I hate you, too, you bitch!"

Without knowing what he was doing, he threw himself at her. He seized her throat and squeezed and squeezed, and then the terrible sounds stopped coming out of her and she lay on her back on the bed staring lifelessly at the ceiling.

HE TURNED away from her, sweating, half sobbing. And he looked at the note on her dressing-table. *I'll call for you at twelve, T.*

So she was going away with him at noon. Lover Boy would be picking her up, and they'd be off to some sun-kissed spot to live it up on Brunner's money.

He caught hold of a fistful of June's dress and tore it open all the way down the front. Then he took some of the packets of dope from a drawer and stuffed them in his pocket.

Once away from the flat, he found a public call-box.

"Hello. . .police?" Jake said. "You won't know me. I'm just tipping you off about something. I hate these filthy scum who live on junkies. You'll find a bloke with dope on him in the Three Bells. . .Bridge Street. . . name of Jake Culley. This

isn't a hoax, but genuine. So long, copper."

When he rang off he walked to the Three Bells in Bridge Street. God, he felt hot. He could do with a long cool beer.

The police turned up and arrested him just as he had wanted them to. And they had suggested going back to his flat to look for more dope—or some information about the pusher—just as he had wanted them to.

And as they went there in the police-car, Jake said, "Look, my wife doesn't know about this racket, so don't get her mixed up in it, will you? She's a nice kid, and I'm fond of her, and I'm only flogging this stuff to make a bit more money and take her away from the stinking hole we're living in."

"Okay, chum, take it easy," one of the C.I.D. men said.

And, then, just as he had hoped, they got there dead on time, and Tony Brunner was there. The discotheque owner drug-pusher sat by the bed, his head in his hands, moaning.

"My God!" Jake screamed, rushing into the room. "What have you done to my wife? What have you done to June?"

He threw himself on the dead girl on the bed and kissed her, sobbing. There were real tears streaming from his eyes—he hadn't expected that he could cry real tears.

"Oh, my poor June. . .my darling. . .my poor *baby*. . ."

And then he was on his feet, and he hurled himself at Tony Brunner. "You lousy rotten murderer! You dirty filthy. . .!"

The two detectives tore him away from June's lover, and once again they were saying, "Okay, okay, take it easy now"—and they held him in a vice-like grip while he glared at Brunner.

So far, so good. He wasn't sure what he'd get for peddling drugs. Couple of years maybe? But Brunner would get ten or fifteen years. He'd been shoved around too long. So now he was shoving the others around, and that was fine. ●

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